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Abstract: PhD Thesis, Durham University 2014

The Whirling Wheel: The Male Construction of Empowered Female Identities in Old Norse Myth and Legend

This thesis examines the body of medieval literature associated with Old Norse myth and legend. Though this is a diffuse corpus produced over a long span of time and from a wide geographical area, it is possible to establish connections between texts and to highlight certain recurring narrative patterns that are deeply entrenched in this literary tradition. The specific focus of the present study is to analyse the narrative patterns that characterise the interactions between male and female figures.

It has long been understood that female figures tend to occupy carefully defined social roles in this body of literature, and much work has been done in assessing these. This thesis takes the unique approach of investigating whether these roles can be viewed, not as a product of the mentality of the writers of this literary material, but rather as a product of male characters within the literary narratives themselves. The investigation poses the question of whether men can be seen, through their words, thoughts, and actions, to be responsible for creating female identities. Intimately connected to the concept of identity creation is the idea of power: this thesis will argue that most male attempts to redefine female identity is motivated by a desire to acquire, control, negate, or otherwise alter, the powers possessed by females. Quite often, because fallible males demonstrate an imperfect understanding of female power, there can be a marked disparity between the abilities certain women are thought to possess, and those they actually do. The thesis will examine a large selection of supernatural female figures, across a broad range of literature, ultimately to suggest that the male creation of female power is deeply entrenched in narrative patterns observable in many different contexts.

**THE WHIRLING WHEEL:
THE MALE CONSTRUCTION OF EMPOWERED FEMALE
IDENTITIES IN OLD NORSE MYTH AND LEGEND**

by

David H. Varley

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

University of Durham

Department of English Studies

2014

Table of Contents

<u>Acknowledgements</u>	7
<u>Introduction</u>	10
i. Opening Remarks	10
ii. Terms and Definitions	13
iii. Choice of Primary Literature	17
iv. Approach	23
v. Miscellany	33
<u>Section 1: Masculinity, the Gods, and the Invention of Female Power</u>	35
1.1. Introduction	35
1.2. Þórr	37
<i>1.2.1. Introduction</i>	37
<i>1.2.2. Encounters with Alien Women</i>	39
<i>1.2.3. The Politics of Þórr's Family</i>	56
<i>1.2.4. Þórr and Cross-dressing</i>	62
1.3. Óðinn	67
<i>1.3.1. Introduction</i>	67
<i>1.3.2. The Forms of Óðinn's Female Relationships</i>	68
<i>1.3.3. Power, Seiðr, and the Act of Cross-dressing</i>	81
1.4. Loki	103
<i>1.4.1. Introduction</i>	103
<i>1.4.2. Loki and the Performance of Femininity</i>	106
<i>1.4.3. Loki's Sexual Relationships</i>	114
1.5. Conclusions	132
<u>Section 2: The Ásynjur</u>	134

2.1. Introduction	134
2.2. The ‘Domestic’ Ásynjur	135
2.2.1. <i>Introduction</i>	135
2.2.2. <i>Frigg/Sága</i>	137
2.2.3. <i>Iðunn</i>	158
2.3. The ‘External’ Ásynjur	166
2.3.1. <i>Introduction</i>	166
2.3.2. <i>Gerðr</i>	167
2.3.3. <i>Skaði</i>	183
2.4. Freyja	198
2.4.1. <i>Introduction</i>	198
2.4.2. <i>Freyja as Witch</i>	199
2.4.3. <i>Freyja as Whore</i>	210
2.4.4. <i>Freyja as Aristocrat</i>	215
2.5. Conclusions	221
<u>Section 3: Male Interactions With Feminised Concepts of Fate and Death</u>	225
3.1. Introduction	225
3.2. Norns and Valkyries	227
3.2.1. <i>Introduction</i>	227
3.2.2. <i>Norns</i>	228
3.2.3. <i>Valkyries</i>	235
3.3. The Transformed Princess	243
3.3.1. <i>Introduction</i>	243
3.3.2. <i>The Princess as Valkyrie</i>	244
3.3.3. <i>The Princess as Troll-Woman</i>	252

3.4. The Figure of the Seeress	261
3.4.1. <i>Introduction</i>	261
3.4.2. <i>Óðinn and the Völur</i>	262
3.4.3. <i>The Völur Amongst Humans</i>	278
3.5. Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr	286
3.5.1. <i>Introduction</i>	286
3.5.2. <i>Þorgerðr in Flateyjarbók</i>	288
3.6. Conclusions	297
<u>Conclusion</u>	301
<u>Bibliography</u>	311
Primary Texts	311
Secondary Texts	318

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and support over many years.**

*‘A maiden’s words
must no man trust,
nor what a woman says,
for on a whirling wheel
were hearts fashioned for them
and fickleness fixed in their breast.’*
– *Hávamál*, st. 84.¹

¹ Trans. Dronke (2011) 18-19.

Introduction

i. Opening Remarks

If this thesis has an identifiable point of origin, it lies in the title of Jenny Jochens's seminal 1996 publication, *Old Norse Images of Women*. The central argument of this work was that literary depictions of women across the corpus of Old Norse literature could be divided into four broad types: the woman in war, the wise woman, the avenger, and the whetter.² Jochens's argument essentially suggests that the characterisation of women in this body of literature is limited to a few pre-set stock characters, and that these identities are related to the functions they fulfil in the text, often as an adjunct to the male-oriented action of the story. This is not to say that clever writers of this material are incapable of creating interesting and nuanced female portraits: time and again these texts present the reader with powerful, compelling, and psychologically convincing women. This is a body of literature in which women can, and do, have power and influence, and can command both the respect of their peers and a central place in the narrative. Jochens's point, though, it to show that whilst one can have nuanced and elaborate portraits of female figures imbued with power and authority, nevertheless they are inevitably presented within an established and consistent framework of social roles.

The aspect of the title that most fascinated me, even when I first read it as an undergraduate, was Jochens's use of the word 'Images'. The word 'image' is one with a broad variety of meanings, and it is evident that Jochens's understanding of it largely agrees with what the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as a fifth meaning:

² Jochens (1996) 88.

A mental representation of something (esp. a visible object) created not by direct perception but by memory or imagination; a mental picture or impression; an idea, conception.³

The word, however, carries a variety of meanings and significances beyond this single definition. Most important is the *OED*'s primary definition of an image:

An artificial imitation or representation of something, esp. of a person or the bust of a person.⁴

This meaning denotes a literal image, a manufactured object designed to represent something. The idea of an image being manufactured is important: it emphasises its artificiality. An image is not the thing in and of itself, but rather the construct of a third party (usually an artist) representing the original, and that has consequently been subject to that party's own sense of interpretation. An image, ultimately, conveys as much information about its creator as it does about the thing it represents.

When Jochens chose to use the word 'image', her intention was to suggest that the writers and compilers of the corpus of Old Norse literature relied upon a stock of pre-conceived roles, and their associated traits and functions, in constructing their female characters. The approach of this thesis is to examine the 'images' of women from a different angle, with regard to the way in which these images are constructed and by whom. If women can be powerful and influential in this literature, and if they can and do take a central role in these narratives, it must be asked whether these fixed and pre-conceived 'images' can be said to represent only the worldviews of the writers and compilers of this material. Another possibility, which it is the intention of the present study to explore, is that the constructors of these images can be seen to be other characters in the

³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, <www.oed.com>, last accessed 24/06/14.

⁴ *OED*, 24/06/14.

narratives themselves, and that the writers and compilers of this literature are often in fact inviting us to consider how women's roles can actively be shaped.

If female images are being shaped, then it probably follows that male figures are doing the shaping. This literature was produced in, and reflects, a patriarchal society: men are overwhelmingly the focus of these narratives, and although women are prominent it is rare to find them without some form of male company in any narrative. In a sense, this means that we, the readers, are constantly viewing the female characters through a lens of maleness, insofar as we observe their actions (and reactions) relative to the male characters that are most often the focus of the narrative. The logical extension of this is to question whether these male 'lenses' can in fact be seen to be an active, rather than a passive, component in interpreting female images. It can be argued that the literary representation of female identities can, in many important cases, be seen to be the product of male figures within the narrative, and it will be demonstrated how this can be shown and what it achieves. It will further be observed that the process of modifying or constructing these female images is related to a male understanding of, and attempt to control or make use of, power.

This is not to suggest, however, that the female figures of Old Norse literature are passive. The present study is not only the examination of how male figures attempt to create or shape identities for women, but also of the many ways in which these identities are resisted or subverted by those on whom they are imposed. Though the first section will focus on male strategies for approaching, redefining, or controlling female identities, the two final sections will examine the female figures themselves and how they respond to such strategies. Though Old Norse literature is invested in patriarchal concerns, it does not necessarily reflect or condone a patriarchal world-view: it will be shown, time and again, that this literature offers the reader portraits of female figures who actively and successfully resist the identities that the patriarchal male figures of the texts impose, or

attempt to impose, upon them. Some women are presented whose power, or force of personality, is an insurmountable obstacle to male redefinition, whilst other women use the identities that a phallogentric society creates for them as a means of achieving their own objectives. In some cases, the literature gives us women who are so adept at manoeuvring themselves through the labyrinthine complexities of Old Norse heterosexual and heterosocial relationships that the male figures with whom they interact seem unaware of how the women are manipulating them. This work, overall, examines the extent to which female identities are created and opposed, and the ways in which a compromise can be negotiated.

The evocative image of the ‘Whirling Wheel’ in *Hávamál* 84 can be used as a poetic analogy for this process, and will form the basis of the discussion in the conclusion of this work. The potter’s wheel is an instrument of creation, suggesting the extent to which female identity can be seen as a construct, but it also raises the implicit question of the identity of the artisan who is operating it. If female identities are a construction, then perhaps the wheel itself is representative of the minds of the male figures who attempt these acts of redefinition.

ii. Terms and Definitions

There are some terms from the title of this study (‘The Male Construction of Empowered Female Identities in Old Norse Myth and Legend’) that require a clear definition, and they will be given below.

The term ‘male’ is in most cases self explanatory, denoting any person (human or otherwise) that is recognisably of the male biological sex. In the case of figures who demonstrate the capability to temporarily change their biological sex, such as Loki, an assumption can be made concerning what might be thought of as their underlying or

default biological sex based their characterisation across the literary corpus as a whole: in the case of Loki, for example, he is predominantly male and therefore will be treated as a man for the purposes of this study. The decision to use the term ‘male’ instead of ‘masculine’ is a consequence of the frequency with which this body of literature blurs the boundaries between the two sexes, particularly with regard to social expectations about gender roles and the public performance of one’s gender. Over the course of the study, it will be observed that there are numerous instances of males whose behaviour can be described as ‘feminine’, and females whose appearance or function are thought of as ‘masculine’; to avoid confusion, and because the thesis is concerned with the ways in which biological males approach biological females, the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ will generally be preferred.

The concept of ‘power’ is one that presents some difficulties in definition. Indeed, if one follows Wittgenstein’s logic, it cannot be defined. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein rejected the notion that words could be clearly defined, and argued that any attempt to impose clear-cut definitions actually detracted from the meaning of a word.⁵ Wittgenstein focuses on the difficulties of understanding the concept of ‘game’, but his arguments are applicable to the concept of ‘power’, whose definition must be circumscribed by how it is used on an individual basis.⁶ In the context of Old Norse scholarship, some academics have attempted to offer some concrete definitions of power: for example, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir bases her definitions on those of Max Weber.⁷ This approach, however, has many limitations, as it restricts an understanding of power to a certain set of presupposed ideas and formulae: the analysis, consequently, is shaped towards certain inevitable conclusions before the argument is even begun. Most scholars of Old Norse, particularly those who examine supernatural beings and happenings, eschew

⁵ Wittgenstein (1958).

⁶ Wittgenstein (1958) 31-2.

⁷ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013) 8.

giving any definition of power, implicitly following Wittgenstein's concept of deriving meaning by individual use.⁸

The present study offers no concrete definitions of power, preferring instead to follow the Wittgenstein-inspired line discussed above, in which meaning is derived from use. That being said, the reader is encouraged to bear in mind Tillich's phenomenology of power.⁹ Tillich reaches the same conclusion as Wittgenstein, arguing that power cannot be defined, but nevertheless offers the opinion that 'Power is real only in its actualisation, in the encounter with other bearers of power and in the ever changing balance which is the result of these encounters.'¹⁰ Tillich's opinion offers a sensible approach, as the nature of power is a broad topic in the context of Old Norse mythology. The ways in which power is understood, expressed, and used, are subtle and many. In the course of this investigation it will be shown that the power possessed by women in this literature can manifest in numerous ways, ranging from the direct use of supernatural abilities to a more passive sense of independent agency conferred upon a woman by her social station. Some manifestations of power are identified as abstractly female in nature, such as by consistent association (for example, *seiðr* or making prophecy) or by the requirement of female attributes for their performance (for example, childbirth), even when they are not practised by females. For the purposes of the present study, power is any independent influence or authority that can be wielded over any given person or situation.

The use and nature of power, furthermore, is closely linked to the identity of the wielder. I have chosen to prefer the term 'identities' in place of Jochens's 'images', as it allows for a slightly broader and more inclusive frame-of-reference. In some cases a particular identity is conferred upon a woman as a consequence of the type of power that

⁸ A comprehensive list would be enormous, but prominent recent studies that deal with power but abstain from giving definitions of it, or else acknowledge that they are irrelevant, include Morris (1991), Ellis Davidson (1998), McKinnell (2005), Dillmann (2006), Schjødt (2008), Tolley (2009), and Mitchell (2011). All of these have, in fact, been used in this thesis.

⁹ Tillich (1954) 41-5.

¹⁰ Tillich (1954) 41.

she has access to, for example a *völva* or a valkyrie being defined as such because that is how she functions. In other cases, a woman's identity governs the expectations of any male figure who approaches her. Quite often, a man might approach a woman to request a certain kind of aid based on what he expects her to be able to provide, for example male figures approaching Freyja to request her feather-cloak because they identify her as provider of magical solutions. In a sense, Freyja's identity is as much an artificial construct as that of the *völva* or the valkyrie, in that her nature as a supplier of magical aid is dependent on a male approaching her and requesting a specific favour, in essence creating for her the identity of a helpful supernatural ally. An identity, ultimately, is the way in which a figure is defined or characterised by another. Whether it is done consciously or not, the constructed female identity is always an artificial state applied to a woman that can be seen to be in some sense different from her natural state or else does not take notice of her individuality. The way by which an identity is created can take many forms. On the one hand, for example, it can manifest as a violent physical or magical assault that produces a literal transformation in a woman's body. At the other extreme, it can be as subtle as the imposition of a particular social label placed upon a woman to lay out her perceived function within a society. Despite the variety of ways in which the creation of female identity can be observed, it will be seen that the underlying purpose of the action, usually as a means of controlling or limiting a female's power, is presented with consistency.

There are several reasons for choosing to limit the present study to literature concerned with mythological and legendary material. The first is that of economy: a full survey of the entire scope of Norse literature would be vast. I have decided to focus on mythological and legendary material for the reason that the fantastical nature of the settings and characters of these narratives afford the writers and compilers of this material the greatest freedom of expression; unencumbered by the constraints of objective reality, and with an imperfectly understood but materially rich pre-Christian inheritance of figures

and situations open to individual reworking or interpretation, these poets and writers are freely able to employ their imaginations. Through this body of literature, therefore, we get an insight into the worldview expressed by the writers and compilers of this material as a whole group, and indeed in individual texts one can observe an individual writer's response to that worldview and other contemporary social concerns.¹¹ In consequence, this body of literature offers the opportunity to see how female figures who exist outside of normal human society are presented, both by the writers themselves and by the equally fantastical males with whom they share the narrative.

iii. Choice of Primary Literature

The numerous genres of Old Norse literature are already reasonably well-defined in modern scholarship, but it would be useful to outline briefly the reasons for the choice of texts used in the thesis.¹² Given the focus on literature that relates mythological and legendary episodes, the principal texts for this investigation will be the poems of the *Poetic Edda*, the prose *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (sometimes called *Snorra Edda*), and the prose sagas that comprise the genre known as the *fornaldarsögur* ('sagas of ancient times'). Other sources, including skaldic poetry, the *konungasögur* ('sagas of kings'), and various histories composed by medieval writers such as Saxo Grammaticus and Adam of Bremen, will be drawn upon when relevant.

The group of poems known collectively, in the current age, as the *Poetic Edda* is one of our main medieval sources for Old Norse mythological narratives. In modern scholarship the term is frequently used to denote the poems contained in the manuscript that is often called the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda (Copenhagen, Gammel kongelig

¹¹ Palmenfelt (2012) 175.

¹² For a thorough introduction to these genres, see O'Donoghue (2004).

samling 2365 4to), which dates from the 1270s.¹³ The term ‘Poetic Edda’ and its derivative, ‘eddic poetry’, are often applied more generally, however, to include poems composed in a similar style, and which depict mythological or legendary episodes, but are found in other manuscripts sources.¹⁴ For the sake of clarity, this thesis will use Gunnell’s definition of eddic poetry as ‘anonymously transmitted “poems”... that deal with the mythic or heroic world of the Nordic countries and make use of the *ljóðaháttir*, *fornyrðislag* or *málaháttir* metres.’¹⁵

Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, written c. 1225, is indisputably our most important prose source of mythological information.¹⁶ Snorri was a prolific writer with a keen antiquarian interest in the mythology of his pre-Christian ancestors, and the first figure to engage in a scholarly study of this literary material.¹⁷ *Edda*, a work in four parts (*Prologue*, *Gylfaginning*, *Skáldskaparmál*, and *Háttatal*), seems to have been intended as a sort of poetry textbook, showcasing the styles of traditional skaldic poetry and explaining the mythological context of the allusions to pre-Christian figures and situations.¹⁸ Snorri also relates several myths that have no counterpart in extant poetry: whether these are products of poems now lost or are in fact Snorri’s original compositions is impossible to tell.¹⁹ The early parts of Snorri’s *Heimskringla*, most notably the *Prologue* and *Ynglinga saga*, also make use of mythological narratives. In these texts, Snorri attempts to fuse mythology and history together into a coherent origin-myth for the Norwegian monarchy.²⁰ *Heimskringla*, despite its use of the gods and depictions of supernatural happenings, is intended as historiography: in both the *Prologue* and *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri acknowledges his use of

¹³ Gunnell (2005) 82.

¹⁴ Abram (2011) 17.

¹⁵ Gunnell (2005) 82. For a full description of the formal requirements of each poetic metre mentioned here, see Poole (2005) 265-9.

¹⁶ Abram (2011) 25.

¹⁷ Abram (2011) 24.

¹⁸ Abram (2011) 25.

¹⁹ Abram (2011) 25.

²⁰ Abram (2011) 22.

earlier, often pre-Christian, skaldic poetry as a source of information, understanding that ‘Scandinavian culture was founded in paganism, and that it retained important cultural resonances long after the conversion’.²¹ Another important set of prose sources for this investigation are the *fornaldarsögur* (‘sagas of ancient times’). The stories contained in these sagas take place before the colonisation of Iceland, in pre-historic Scandinavia. Despite the antiquity of their setting, they are in fact slightly later in composition than other prose genres of Norse-Icelandic literature, only becoming prominent in the fourteenth century.²² Many of them contain snippets of eddic poetry, brief sequences probably derived from longer poems, some of which are likely to be very ancient, and some are likely to be contemporary with the composition of the saga but are written in pastiche of older poetic styles.²³

One issue that must be addressed is that the selection of texts posited above are the product of a number of societies from across a wide geographical area, and in some instances there is a span of several centuries between the composition of individual works. For example, some skaldic poetry is attributed to individuals active in the ninth century, and it is generally accepted that many of these attributions are accurate and thus the poetry conveys a genuinely heathen voice;²⁴ at the other end of the scale, many of the *fornaldarsögur* are products of Christian societies in the fourteenth century.²⁵ Comparing and contrasting literature produced over such a scope of time from across multiple medieval Germanic cultures can, in consequence, be a fraught process.

The principal issue that must be faced is that dating or contextualising any given Old Norse text with any reasonable degree of accuracy is difficult, often impossible. Even making as simple a distinction as arguing whether an individual text is Christian or

²¹ Abram (2011) 23.

²² Abram (2011) 23.

²³ McKinnell (2005) 41.

²⁴ Abram (2011) 13.

²⁵ Abram (2011) 24.

probably pre-Christian in origin can be troublesome. By way of an example, the eddic poem *Prymskviða* (one of the most important texts for the argument of this thesis) presents a number of troubling issues for the would-be dater.²⁶ Various scholars have suggested dates ranging from the end of the ninth century to the early thirteenth century.²⁷ On the one hand, the poem's irreverent treatment of the gods, its broad comic tone, its unusual use of rhyme and repetition, and the lack of any pre-thirteenth-century source referencing the story, all point towards a thirteenth-century origin for the poem, in which context it would irrefutably be a Christian poem.²⁸ On the other hand, some scholars have argued, legitimately, that mockery and irreverence do not necessarily indicate non-belief.²⁹ The poem, furthermore, contains linguistic features that suggest a form of the language much earlier than what was current in the thirteenth century; particularly striking is the frequent use of the word *um* as metrical padding in contexts where tenth-century forms of the language had an extra syllable.³⁰ This would suggest a pre-Christian origin. Even such a fundamental poem as *Prymskviða*, then, simply cannot be dated.

With texts whose manuscript provenance and thematic content strongly suggest a post-Conversion date of composition, such as the *fornaldarsögur*, there are still a number of issues that must be taken into consideration. Given the potentially substantial length of time between the heathen period and the composition of the *fornaldarsögur*, the degree to which sagas of this type accurately represent a heathen worldview is questionable. Despite this, however, much of the material contained in them is probably a response to, or makes use of, old traditions that stretch back into pre-Christian antiquity.³¹ Some aspect of this issue is reflected in the fact, mentioned previously, that many of these sagas contain poetic

²⁶ For a full account of the problems dating *Prymskviða*, see McTurk (2007) 127-9.

²⁷ McTurk (2007) 127.

²⁸ McTurk (2007) 127-8.

²⁹ McTurk (2007) 128-9.

³⁰ McTurk (2007) 128-9.

³¹ Abram (2011) 24.

material that may well convey a genuine heathen voice, or be within living memory of heathen voices. For example, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, though at least in part a thirteenth-century text, is clearly composed of, or draws influence from, material across a wide range of time and space.³² Some parts of the text may even be post-medieval.³³ Tolkien is minded to see the bulk of the traditions conveyed in the saga as rooted in the early twelfth century, though individual parts and episodes may come from other times in this clearly composite work.³⁴ The saga, furthermore, contains substantial fragments of three poems that almost certainly significantly predate the prose text.³⁵ One of these, customarily referred to as ‘The Battle of the Goths and the Huns’, which shapes the conclusion of the saga’s story, may be one of the oldest poems preserved in northern Europe, thus conveying an authentically pagan perspective.³⁶

The main reason that it is appropriate, however, to study texts such as *Þrymskviða* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* side-by-side is that they are all invested in the same body of tradition. With perhaps a very few exceptions, it is impossible to pinpoint the moment at which a mythological episode or scenario is invented; even our earliest extant skaldic poetry is, in most cases, borrowing elements and situations from a stock of traditional components preserved in the oral continuum. Indeed, the obscurity of many of the mythological references in even our earliest skaldic poetry suggests that they are allusions to myths that would be well known and widely understood: it is poetry that on its own merits ‘gives up information reluctantly, and requires a great deal of interpretative work from its readers... [it] places a great premium on complexity.’³⁷

³² See Tolkien (1960) vii-xxx for a thorough discussion of dating each part of the text.

³³ Tolkien (1960) xxviii.

³⁴ Tolkien (1960) viii.

³⁵ Tolkien (1960) xi-xii and xviii-xix.

³⁶ Tolkien (1960) xxi.

³⁷ Abram (2011) 13.

This reliance on a shared tradition is also evident in the sources that make up the primary focus of the present investigation, all of which were produced in a Christian context but draw upon, or respond to, a rich body of pre-Christian beliefs and stories. Dating the individual poems that make up the *Poetic Edda* is in many cases difficult, as discussed above. Some versions of certain poems doubtless significantly predate their manuscript preservation, whilst the composition of others is probably roughly contemporary with the manuscript.³⁸ Snorri, in his *Edda*, is a named example of a Christian scholar investigating his culture's heathen inheritance. It is evident that he at least had access to *Völuspá*, *Grímnismál* and *Váþfrúðnismál* from the eddic corpus, but probably other poems as well.³⁹ Some of the mythological episodes Snorri recounts have no counterpart in extant poetry, and we do not know whether this is because we have lost these earlier texts or whether these stories are Snorri's invention;⁴⁰ in one sense it is unimportant whether they are Snorri's creations or not, as the point is that he, a Christian writer, is engaging with and responding to the same literary tradition, with its entrenched associations and scenarios, as the writers and compilers of eddic poetry and their forebears. The same is true of the writers of the later *fornaldarsögur*. The degree to which these texts accurately represent a pagan worldview is questionable, but the important thing about them is that they use, or respond to, old traditions.⁴¹ Clunies Ross explains the rationale behind the *fornaldarsögur* thus:

The themes, characters and the whole world of the *fornaldarsaga* lend themselves to interpretation, not as realistic narratives, but rather as subjects dealing with deep and disturbing human issues that cannot be approached from the perspective of the

³⁸ Abram (2011) 18-9.

³⁹ Lassen (2013) 8

⁴⁰ Abram (2011) 28

⁴¹ Abram (2011) 24.

mundane world but rather must be enacted in a literary world in which tabu subjects can be raised and aired, though not necessarily resolved.⁴²

Viewed as products of the imagination that draw on an inherited literary tradition, rather than as anything approaching an authentic guide to pre-Christian belief, these sagas are a rich resource for observing how narrative patterns generated centuries earlier maintained their literary currency, and how they were used or adapted to highlight the social anxieties of their own time period by examining them through the lens of an imagined, but wonderfully vivid, pre-historic world.

Although the components of the literary tradition that links all these primary sources may be subject to modification by any individual writer in response to the climate in which he produced his work, it is nevertheless evident that elements of that tradition remain consistent across time and space. The Old Norse mythological world is one that appealed to a great many people long after it had ceased to be a focus of actual belief: for the composers, consumers, and scribes of this literature, it became instead a deeply entrenched, endlessly mineable resource of literary ideas and materials that could be used to great effect. The tropes that make up the tradition might be applied in new and interesting ways, but in themselves they are remarkably resistant to change. The present study, then, is an investigation of some aspect of this shared stock of concepts, charting the way in which certain patterns are used time and again across a wide literary continuum.

iv. Approach

The purpose of this section is to discuss the various approaches that the present study will take to the literature described above, and to situate it in the context of recent scholarship. The body of literature concerned with mythological and legendary narratives is one that has been subject to considerable academic scrutiny for many decades, and continues to be

⁴² Clunies Ross (2010) 80.

so today. As a consequence, there have been a number of identifiable trends in contemporary scholarship in this area, some of which are relevant here.

The female figures of Old Norse literature have been the focus of much scholarly inquiry, and the nature of such investigations has changed markedly over time. In particular, the rise of feminist theory and the concept of gender as a literary construct lead, around the mid-1980s, to a fundamental shift of perspective in literary analysis, with notable regard to the rising prominence of studies that focused specifically on women or the nature of femininity.⁴³ Several recent studies, such as David Clark's *Gender, Violence and the Past in Edda and Saga* and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, have taken aspects of feminist theory and gender theory and applied them successfully to Old Norse mythological literature.⁴⁴ The present investigation, however, will not utilise theoretical models in the overt way that these two studies have. Gender theory, like any theory, maintains a certain distance from the texts, and the use of the highly technical terminology that is often employed in the context of theory can obscure or unnecessarily complicate the analysis. This is not to say that the present study does not engage with concepts that have been produced from theoretical models, but rather that it builds upon previous theoretical work; I have chosen, in my approach, to focus closely on the texts themselves and on plain speaking.

In this regard, this study is similar to others that, whilst using or developing ideas derived from theoretical work, focus squarely on literary-critical analysis. Perhaps the single most influential article concerning femaleness in Norse literature and culture, and therefore for the present study, is Carol J. Clover's 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe.'⁴⁵ Clover argues that early Scandinavian culture had a sex/gender system in which biological gender was of secondary concern to actions and

⁴³ Jochens (1996) xii.

⁴⁴ Clark (2012) and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013b).

⁴⁵ Clover (1993).

public performance, sometimes to the extent of being irrelevant. Men could ‘become’ women by being weakened by decrepitude or by being penetrated, and women could ‘become’ men through force of will and assertive behaviour. According to Clover, gender was perceived as a ‘permeable membrane’ which could be traversed by behavioural action, rather than as an impenetrable category.⁴⁶ In a sense, it is this ‘membrane’ that forms the basis of my investigation: if gender categories can be seen to be a product of behaviour rather than biology, then a question that is implicitly raised by Clover’s work is how expectations of gender behaviour are to be defined, and by whom. The present study focuses on how male characters can be seen to define different female roles, and consequently attempt to impose those roles upon female figures who are not always receptive to them.

Clover’s work also laid the way for a number of studies concerned with the performative aspects of gender roles. One of the most important of these is Jenny Jochens’s *Old Norse Images of Women*, which was discussed in the opening remarks of the thesis.⁴⁷ Jochens argues for women in Old Norse literature conforming to a handful of stock types whose function is to motivate the plot; it is the intention of the present study to investigate whether such pre-determined roles can be seen to be a product of characters within the narrative itself. It must be questioned, in essence, whether male characters can be seen to have certain assumptions about the functions females fulfil, and consequently the extent to which they attempt to impose these assumptions on women in the form of new identities. Another academic whose work has been important in this direction is Zoe Borovsky, who in two influential articles has examined the extent to which the characterisation of females in Old Norse literature is dependent on vocal performance; that

⁴⁶ Clover (1993) 387.

⁴⁷ Jochens (1996)

is, what women say, or what is said about them, serve to define them.⁴⁸ The idea that someone's role can be defined, or redefined, through speech acts is an important one that this present study will consider. Speech acts can be used to impose a new definition on a woman's role, but it will be seen that the unvoiced actions of men, based on their assumptions about how certain women ought to behave, can be just as effective at attempting to force women to adopt certain pre-determined roles.

Some studies, such as Heinrichs (1986), Jesch (1991), Jochens (1995), and Kress (2002), have attempted to situate Old Norse literary portrayals of women in the context of social reality, drawing on interdisciplinary approaches and deriving evidence from historical and archaeological sources. These studies are important, as social reality must necessarily have influenced literary concerns. Old Norse literature may be phallogentric in nature, and to a large degree reflect patriarchal social concerns, but to some extent the real women of medieval Scandinavia must be reflected in their literary counterparts, as indeed must male assumptions about how those women were supposed to function in society. If this is a patriarchal literature, however, it is not one that is dismissive of women; rather, it is one that interrogates the concept of female power. In all genres of poetry and prose, one can find examples of strong-willed and independent women who function alongside, and often surpass in magnificence, male warriors and gods. This study builds on the works of those mentioned above in suggesting that many Old Norse texts demonstrate a consistent underlying and self-aware understanding of the symbiotic relationship between male authority and female power in medieval society. I am arguing that this is a literary corpus that, in responding to the actual and historical social tensions concerned with the place and role of women in medieval society, is implicitly questioning the validity and vulnerability of its own patriarchal worldview, and interrogating the extent to which the nature and

⁴⁸ Borovsky (1999) and (2002).

scope of female power is a product of, or is at least defined by, the lens of the male imagination.

Old Norse literature often relies on recurring narrative patterns, and this is especially true of mythological or legendary narratives. Many of these patterns are apparent in the fantastical literatures of early cultures; demonstrating this was the approach of several early studies in comparative mythology, such as those by Frazer, Campbell and Dumézil.⁴⁹ The use of these recurring patterns, rather than being restrictive or limiting, is in fact highly informative from a literary-critical perspective. It is because we observe, time and again, these patterns emerge from the literature that we can examine how individual stories play with the tropes and expectations of these wider traditional patterns. When it comes to certain types of women, such as giantesses or *völur*, the reader can approach the literature with a received notion of how these women are expected to behave and to be treated by male characters who encounter them: how these women respond to or subvert these expectations in any given story can be very revealing, and oftentimes demonstrates the extent to which such assumptions about their behaviour are not universal rules but rather a product of the male mind.

Three works on the narrative patterns of Old Norse mythological literature are particularly important for the present study. The first of these is Margaret Clunies Ross's *Prolonged Echoes*.⁵⁰ Clunies Ross ultimately argues for the Old Norse conception of the universe as a place defined by negative reciprocity: one cultural group always attempting to profit at the expense of another, impersonally and without sentiment. As a consequence of this, the mythological universe can be divided into numerous opposing groups or tribes, and one of the main ones that Clunies Ross describes is the opposition between males and females, with a rigid sense of separation between these groups. The concept of negative

⁴⁹ Frazer (1998); Campbell (2008); Dumézil (1959), expanded and translated into English as Dumézil (1973).

⁵⁰ Clunies Ross (1994a).

reciprocity is important as it establishes a sense of aggressive competition between social groups, and in the context of the present study it will be examined in the light of the exchanging of identities: the way in which members of one social group attempt to place new definitions on the members of other social groups as a means of seizing control over them. The recurring idea of tension between social groups is also explored in John McKinnell's *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend*.⁵¹ McKinnell's exploration of the patterns evident in this mythology is particularly useful with regard to defining the 'Other' in society, demonstrating the extent to which the alien is often synonymous with that which is female from a patriarchal perspective. I build on McKinnell's arguments by suggesting that these texts are self-consciously patriarchal. The alienation of mythological women can be seen, not merely as a by-product of the narrative viewpoint, but as an observable process in which male literary characters themselves change women into the 'Other' by the way they approach them. One final work concerning the patterns of mythology that is important for the present study is Jens Peter Schjødt's *Initiation Between Two Worlds*.⁵² Though the intent of Schjødt's inquiry is to suggest the nature of pre-Christian religious practices based on patterns of interaction in literary evidence, as a consequence he reveals how deeply embedded some of these patterns are and the extent to which they are open to interpretation. Schjødt's focus on the concept of initiation is important in two respects for the present study: first, in that it serves to emphasise the distinct boundaries between different social groups, and secondly in that the process of initiation is a form of redefinition allowing a figure to traverse between groups. It can be seen that initiation into a social group is one form of redefinition. Often, the initiation of a female figure into a patriarchal society, such as Freyja's difficult integration into the Æsir, can be seen as means of acquiring female power for that society. Initiation can also be an

⁵¹ McKinnell (2005).

⁵² Schjødt (2008).

enforced process done against the will of the initiate, as in the case of Gerðr's problematical assimilation into the society of the gods.

Given that aspects of gender and of recurring narrative patterns are the two thematic concepts central to the thesis, the investigation understandably covers a large range of literature and assesses numerous figures and scenarios; this presents certain problems with regard to the arrangement and organisation of the material. Eventually, however, the material seemed to divide itself into three discrete sections, arranged by a broadly top-down hierarchical structure relative to the social status of the characters under discussion.

This arrangement of the material means that the first section, 'Masculinity, the Gods, and the Invention of Female Power', focuses on the figures of the three most prominent male deities represented in mythological literature: Óðinn, Þórr and Loki. The rationale behind the decision to start with these three figures is that in order to understand how female identities can be seen as a product of the male imagination, it is first necessary to examine how these prominent male figures themselves engage with empowered females. Each of these gods interacts with empowered females, but also attempts in some way to seize direct control of powers that are specifically understood to be female in nature. One example of a female power which is desired, particularly by Óðinn, is the form of magic known as *seiðr*; in interrogating Óðinn's preoccupation with *seiðr* I build on recent works, such as those by Stephen Mitchell and Neil Price, demonstrating how their historical and archaeological approaches can inform our understanding of the literature.⁵³ By doing this, it can be seen that concerns about *seiðr* can be linked into a much wider literary discourse about suppressing feminine power in females whilst simultaneously trying to masculinise it in order to make it more socially acceptable. It will be shown that a parity can be drawn between various kinds of anti-female actions undertaken by Óðinn, Þórr and Loki: some

⁵³ Mitchell (2011) and Price (2002).

forms of Óðinn's magical practices can be seen, for example, to be connected with Þórr's physical assaults on giantesses, or with a cross-dressed Loki's creation of another individual's female identity.

One major intellectual strand that emerges in the first section is the question of the competency of male figures at emulating the female powers they appropriate. To ascertain this, one can look at, and compare, the various ramifications and consequences generated when male gods attempt to seize control of female power, and to what extent these results run contrary to the gods' initial intentions. One aspect of this is the consequences such actions have for the manliness of each god: building on the work of Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, amongst others, it can be seen that in attempting to redefine female power as they take it for themselves, these gods inevitably end up also redefining themselves, often at the cost of their own masculine identity.⁵⁴ Another consequence of the male desire to redefine specifically female power as something more masculine can be seen in the familial relationships of these gods: John Lindow in particular has published a number of works examining how the familial relations of gods can be seen to suffer as a consequence of their actions, and I build on this work by demonstrating how many of the strife-filled situations depicted in mythological literature can be analysed along gender lines.⁵⁵

In mapping out the ways that Óðinn, Þórr and Loki approach and interact with female characters, it can be seen that all three males present, despite their many differences, a uniform approach towards powerful women, the intention of which is sometimes to deny their femaleness as a means of negating their power, sometimes to redefine the nature of the woman to make her power more accessible or understandable to them, and sometimes as a means of seizing female power for their own direct control.

⁵⁴ Meulengracht Sørensen (1983).

⁵⁵ For example, Lindow (1988), (1992), (1994), (1997) and (2002).

The idea of women who are powerful in their own right becomes the dominant theme of the second section, which focuses on ‘The Ásynjur’. One of the core elements of the present investigation is to examine what disparity there is between the abilities and influences that empowered mythological women are actually demonstrated to possess, and those that male characters believe them to possess. Lotte Motz was amongst the first to suggest that the female figures of Old Norse mythological literature are of little interest to male writers, and consequently these women are often saddled with a token designation relating to some part of their function;⁵⁶ Motz’s argument is extended here to suggest that the imposition of these restrictive labels on female functions can be seen to be a product of male perceptions within the narrative, rather than necessarily reflecting the patriarchal viewpoint of any individual writer. As a consequence, in many cases the powers of the goddesses can be seen to be both varied and substantial, but the men who approach them to require some aspect of their power can be seen to be limiting them to a specific role, and consequently to a limited identity: an example of this would be Iðunn, a goddess whose power is demonstrably wide-ranging but who is inevitably marginalised in any male discourse to the status of a functionary whose role is to sustain the patriarchal Æsir. The separation of power and identity is a process that particularly plagues Freyja: despite being manifestly powerful, it will be shown that men who approach her inevitably attempt to pigeonhole her into one of three distinct archetypal roles.

One concept that emerges in the second section is the idea that female figures can be seen to anticipate, and react against, the labels that men place on them. Subverting patriarchal expectations of how women are supposed to behave or function becomes, instead, a means to power for an individual woman: in essence, in some cases the creation of female power can be an unintended consequence of a male attempt to redefine a female. Elements of this situation can be seen with most of the prominent goddesses, often in quite

⁵⁶ Motz (1980).

different ways: Frigg, for example, can be seen to be adept at fulfilling or subverting the role of a queen-figure (inasmuch as she is the legitimate wife of a god who occupies the highest position of sovereignty amongst the gods) to match whatever is beneficial to her, while Skaði is shown to be capable of negotiating her redefinition from alien outsider to divine bride in such a way as to give herself further power. By comparing the ways in which various goddesses respond to male attempts to redefine them, it is possible to draw interesting conclusions about situations in which some females appear powerless: for example, I build on the analyses of *Skírnismál* undertaken by Ursula Dronke, Stephen Mitchell and Rudolf Simek to suggest a radical reinterpretation of Gerðr's position in divine society.⁵⁷ Gerðr's actions in that poem, taken in the wider mythological context, can be read as the giantess using the new identity that is being forced upon her as a means of punishing the patriarchal class that is oppressing her.

Another concept that becomes prominent in the second section of this thesis is that of personal territory, and how the ownership of separate property is used to highlight gender concerns. Many of the *Ásynjur*, and other supernatural women discussed later in third section, possess property that is independent of the male *Æsir*. The existence of independent female territory becomes important when observing how it affects the interactions between male and female characters; the action of a male approaching a female, and subsequently attempting to redefine her, can be greatly altered depending on whether she is occupying a notionally male or female physical space.

The third and final section of the present study, 'Male Interactions with Feminised Concepts of Fate and Death', further broadens the frame of reference to examine some of the miscellaneous supernatural female figures whose functions are highly relevant to the lives of males, such as the norns, valkyries and *völur*. Recent studies, such as those by Clive Tolley and Karen Bek-Pedersen, have focused on these groups of supernatural

⁵⁷ Dronke (1962), Mitchell (1983), and Simek (2001).

women and attempted to reconstruct some understanding of how these beings functioned in a religious or ritualistic sense;⁵⁸ the thesis builds on these works, but moves away from them in examining these women as purely literary figures, allowing for a more dynamic contrast between social groups that exist simultaneously in our extant literature. Instead of trying to ascertain the relevance of these mythological or fantastical beings to the lives of the readership (or more probably their heathen ancestors), my study instead looks at how the same groups of men, in literature, differ in their approaches to different groups of women.

A great many of the figures discussed in the third section are representative of the concept of fate, something understandably important to the lives of males. The reduction of an abstract concept, such as fate or death, to a human-like figure is an important one: the female agent of fate is approachable in a way that the nebulous concept is not, and can be negotiated with. How males approach these figures, then, is charged with meaning; it will be argued that the female nature of such figures is important, as in a sense it invites males to attempt to redefine fate or death as something more useful and more personal to them. By comparing the situations of groups such as the *völur* and the *norns* with those of the goddesses explored in the second section, it will be shown that once again many of these females can be seen to actively subvert male expectations of their behaviour for personal gain: it is not only the goddesses who demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which male figures attempt to place restrictive or controlling redefinitions on them, but other supernatural women in other positions as well.

v. Miscellany

A few notes regarding the formatting and presentation of the present study, and other cosmetic arrangements:

⁵⁸ Tolley (2009) and Bek-Pedersen (2011).

- When translating proper nouns concerning a single figure or character into English, I follow the usual scholarly convention of rendering them in the Old Norse nominative form (e.g. Óðinn instead of Odin, Freyr instead of Frey). With regard to nouns that pertain to a group or collective, I have retained the Old Norse nominative plural (e.g. *völur*) except where a term has entered into the modern English vernacular to such a degree as to be better recognized by its contemporary usage (e.g. valkyries instead of *valkyrjur*, norns instead of *nornir*).
- Regarding the use of ‘q’ and ‘ö’, this thesis will consistently use ‘ö’ except for when it is quoting directly from a source that uses the ‘q’ convention.
- Referencing is done in a standard and self-explanatory way. There are two exceptions to the standard form. First, given the substantial use of eddic poetry in the thesis, references to individual poems, in the footnotes, are made only by title and stanza number given in Gustav Neckel’s *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*;⁵⁹ note that, following a common convention, the titles of eddic poems reproduce Neckel’s spelling when they occur in the footnotes, since this particular edition is being referred to, but they are given in standardised spelling when they occur in the body of the thesis. The second exception concerns works by, or attributed to, Snorri Sturluson: given that these comprise a substantial number of primary references in this study, for ease of clarity footnotes give references by title as in the manner of anonymous works.

⁵⁹ Neckel (1936).

Section 1: Masculinity, the Gods, and the Invention of Female Power

1.1. Introduction

As outlined in the general introduction, this study will loosely follow a top-down method of progression through the hierarchy of the mythical world. This opening section will therefore consider the three most prominent male figures at the highest level of divine society: Óðinn, Þórr and Loki. The god Freyr might also be considered a prominent male figure who interacts with empowered women, but given that this interaction takes place within a single mythological episode, and concern a single female, Gerðr, an assessment of Freyr's nature will be given in the section of this study devoted to Gerðr (2.3.2.).

There are several reasons why it is appropriate to focus on these figures, and to understand how they approach the concept of their own gender, and navigate the potential insecurities or vulnerabilities that arise from it. First, these three gods are notable for the amount of exposure they receive in Old Norse literature, most prominently in eddic materials: it is often they who come into contact with empowered female figures, and as such they are often the masculine presence against which feminine power is juxtaposed. Secondly, between them these three gods embody, or relate to, many of the main masculine stock character types of saga literature: Óðinn functions as aristocrat, poet and sorcerer; Þórr functions as a warrior and of all the gods most closely reflects human behaviour and concerns; Loki functions as mischief maker and deviant.

Above all, Óðinn, Þórr, and Loki interact with female power on a personal level. They engage and negotiate with empowered females, but also themselves at times adopt concepts of power and authority associated with femaleness. Given the extent to which transgressing the gender boundary is a social taboo in Old Norse culture, it is curious that all three of these figures do in fact consciously flout the social norm.⁶⁰ The idea of a male

Neckel (1936).
 ørensen (1983) 79-87.

figure involving himself personally in problematised and highly personal issues of gender identity is clearly one that exerts a powerful influence over the imagination of the writers, compilers, and presumably audience, of mythological literature; it is also clear that the literary relationship between gender identity and the self is a complex one.

With this in mind, what follows in this section will be devoted to an investigation of the ways in which each god negotiates with female power on a personal level. Whilst each god's approach to empowered females and feminised power is on a superficial level distinct and individual, but behind their differentiated actions lie a fundamental set of assumptions and themes that characterise heterosexual power relations. It will ultimately be suggested that when the actions and aspects of the gods are taken into consideration both singularly and collectively they demonstrate many of the anxieties associated with inter-gender relations.

1.2. Þórr

1.2.1. Introduction

Although Óðinn, as the god most associated with the aristocracy and aristocratic values in the extant literature, would be the logical starting point for a thesis approaching the Norse mythological world from a top-down hierarchical approach, nevertheless the present study will begin with an examination of his son, Þórr. The reason for this is that Þórr's interactions with females and concepts of female power are arguably the least complicated among those of the three gods under discussion here, although material concerning Þórr presents the reader with a great deal of information about inter-gender relations. Depictions of Þórr, furthermore, as has been suggested, are more likely to reflect human male behaviours and concerns about gender, especially when contrasted with situations describing his fellow deities, and thus it will be useful to establish the pattern of Þórr's interactions with empowered females before examining the manner in which Óðinn and Loki deviate from it.

The extent of Þórr's similarity to human males in terms of his behaviours and concerns requires questioning. It is customary to think of Þórr as the defender and sustainer of both the divine and the human realms, and indeed there is a wealth of evidence for this in his characterisation.⁶¹ It is, however, important to reflect that being a friend of man is not the same thing as being an image of man. There are, however, factors that support the close identification between Þórr and male human beings.

Perhaps the best reason for closely identifying Þórr with some aspect of humanity is his accessibility: he is 'a more straightforward figure... there is nothing subtle or devious about [him]'.⁶² Þórr's concerns are both simple and transparent, a characteristic that distinguishes them from the often inscrutable dealings of the god's fellow deities. His

⁶¹ See, for example, Lindow (2001) 287-91, Abram (2011) 5-6 and Simek (1993) 316-20.

⁶² McKinnell (1994) 57.

preoccupation with the defence of the realm and the superiority of his martial prowess would reflect the concerns of both the warrior and farming classes of medieval Scandinavian society, a factor which is likely reflected in the obvious popularity of Þórr worship.⁶³

Another aspect of Þórr's universal appeal is his tendency to be the butt of the joke. Whilst poems such as *Lokasenna* prove that none of the gods possesses an unassailable dignity, it is nevertheless Þórr who is most often found in a compromising position of one sort or another. Whereas the shaming of the gods in *Lokasenna*, or indeed in any other text where a god other than Þórr is mocked or censured, is treated with a severity that befits its impropriety, Þórr's mishaps are more often intended to be comic.⁶⁴ The most prominent examples of episodes in which Þórr is subjected to comic mockery are the poems *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Prymskviða*, and the Útgarða-Loki episode related in *Gylfaginning*.⁶⁵ Each story, furthermore, has an uncontroversial conclusion: in *Hárbarðsljóð*, Þórr comically stomps off in a huff, having not only lost the argument but also having failed to realise that he has been the victim of his father's practical joke;⁶⁶ in *Prymskviða*, Þórr's shameful and humiliating female disguise is revealed to be merely illusory once he reverts to his standard role of giant-killing;⁶⁷ and in the Útgarða-Loki episode, though Þórr is ultimately defeated by his enemy's powerful illusions, it is nevertheless shown to have been a close contest, and one in which Þórr proved his superhuman strength and prowess without even being conscious that he was doing so.⁶⁸ No lasting harm is done to Þórr's honour in any of these situations, which serve, more than anything else, to humanise Þórr

⁶³ For an overview of evidence concerning Þórr worship, see Simek (1993) 320-3.

⁶⁴ Clunies Ross (2002) 183.

⁶⁵ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 37-44.

⁶⁶ 'Hárbarðsljóð' 59-60. (N.B. all references to eddic poems are given by title and stanza number from Neckel [1936]).

⁶⁷ 'Prymskviða' 31-2.

⁶⁸ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 43.

by demonstrating that he is prone to the same casual misfortunes that afflict humanity daily.

A further factor that suggests Þórr's similarity to humans is the fact that he spends a large amount of time in human company, principally his servants Þjálfi and Röskva, a markedly distinct characteristic that is not shared by the other gods. Arnold has argued that Þórr's close relationship with these two humans is indicative of his unique degree of tolerance for and understanding of human affairs compared to that of other gods, and that Þjálfi and Röskva are probably intended to symbolise humanity as whole and consequently Þórr's patronage of the species.⁶⁹ Þjálfi is attested only once in the Poetic Edda, in a passing reference in *Hárbarðsljóð*,⁷⁰ but the roles of these two humans are expanded upon throughout *Snorra Edda*. Whilst several different readings have been offered of Þórr's close association with human beings, they retain the central element of suggesting that Þórr's relationship with humanity is based on mutual trust, understanding and tolerance.⁷¹ Whilst his position is, as befits his status, one of aristocratic dominance and martial superiority over his human servants, it is nevertheless a respectful relationship: Þórr may be a superhuman, but he is still some kind of human.

1.2.2. Encounters with Alien Women

When considering Þórr's reception of, and response to, female figures from outside the social circle of the Æsir and Vanir, most scholars tend to focus on the myth of his visit to Geirröðr.⁷² This is recounted in complex fashion in the skaldic poem *Þórdrápa* attributed to Eilífr Guðrúnarson, which is preserved in and expanded upon by Snorri's

⁶⁹ Arnold (2011) 48-9.

⁷⁰ 'Hárbarðsljóð' 39.

⁷¹ See, for example, McKinnell (1994) 62-4, Lindow (2001) 287-91, and most notably Arnold (2011) 48-53.

⁷² Important studies include Clunies Ross (1981) 370-91, Motz (1993c) 469-87, Clunies Ross (1993) 491-95, McKinnell (1994) 57-86, McKinnell (2005) 118-25, Schjødt (2008) 242-8 and Arnold (2011).

Skáldskaparmál.⁷³ It is also recounted, albeit much more loosely, in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus.⁷⁴ McKinnell has, furthermore, argued that elements of the story pattern are contained in other accounts of Þórr's activities; whilst this argument is persuasive, for the sake of clarity this thesis will deal with the story in its most basic forms.⁷⁵ Snorri's account is the most lucid and comprehensible of these, and it can be summarised thus:

At an unspecified time before the current events of the story, Loki was captured by the giant Geirröðr, who persuaded the god to betray Þórr in return for his freedom. The released Loki steals Þórr's magical hammer, girdle and gauntlets (the source of much of his strength), and persuades him to visit Geirröðargarðr. Þórr sets out, with Loki as his companion (Þjálfi in the *Pórsdrápa* version). They encounter a helpful giantess named Gríðr, who warns Þórr about Geirröðr's true nature, and supplies the god with her own magic girdle, gauntlets and staff. Þórr and Loki come to a great river, Vimur, and the former fords it with the help of the staff whilst the latter holds on to the girdle. The river rises dramatically whilst they are in its midst, and Þórr observes that Geirröðr's daughter Gjálp is straddling the river and causing this effect; it is not clear from the language used whether it is urine or menstrual fluid that Gjálp is expelling.⁷⁶ Þórr casts a stone at her genitals, saying '*At ósi skal á stemma*' 'A river must be stemmed at its source.'⁷⁷ The flood abates, and Þórr and Loki escape the river. Arriving at Geirröðr's abode, Gjálp and her sister Greip raise the chair in which Þórr sits and attempt to crush him against the ceiling. Bracing his staff against the ceiling, Þórr pushes down and breaks both of his attackers' spines. The story then ends with Þórr using the magic gauntlets to throw a lump of molten iron at Geirröðr, killing him.

⁷³ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 24-30; the poem itself can be found from 25-30.

⁷⁴ Saxo Grammaticus (1931) 238-43.

⁷⁵ McKinnell (1994) 59-68. For an overview of the comparison of story elements in the different versions, see Motz (1993c) 469. Various skaldic verses may contain obscure references to this story as well, for which see Lindow (1988) 122-3.

⁷⁶ McKinnell (1994) 69-70.

⁷⁷ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 25.

As noted above, this episode has been subjected to numerous scholarly studies, the general consensus of which is that it represents Þórr asserting his masculine dominance in the face of dangerously independent and empowered female agency, although there is some disagreement in how this conclusion is arrived at. Motz has argued that this episode's association of female sexuality with water is highly uncharacteristic of Old Norse literature, and thus probably represents a borrowing from the Irish or French tradition;⁷⁸ Clunies Ross, however, has countered this assertion directly and, in my opinion, convincingly.⁷⁹ Clunies Ross has argued, furthermore, that the menstrual fluid in the river is representative of Jörð, the personification of earth and Þórr's mother: Þórr's defeat of the giantess and escape from the river consequently represents liberation from a mother-figure.⁸⁰ McKinnell, though finding much of Clunies Ross's argument persuasive, suggests it may not have been a conscious intention on the part of the author of *Þórsdrápa*:

It thus seems likely that if [*Þórsdrápa*] reflects a fear of being dominated, it is women in general, not merely the mother, who is to be rejected. Perhaps, in view of the Gríð/Gjálp contrast, it is even woman in general *as opposed to* mother who must be rejected.⁸¹

More recently, Arnold has chosen to view the episode as something more self-reflexively telling about the psychology of masculinity:

Although it is possible to interpret this as Thor necessarily asserting his manhood in the face of rampant female sexuality, the depiction of female power overmastered by a penetrative male act is also suggestive of deep-rooted male anxieties

⁷⁸ Motz (1993c) 476.

⁷⁹ Clunies Ross (1993) 491-95.

⁸⁰ Clunies Ross (1981) 377.

⁸¹ McKinnell (1994) 71-2.

concerning women and the crude sexualised responses that these anxieties commonly elicit.⁸²

Though a great deal of the critical analysis referenced above is convincing, there are several issues worthy of further exploration. The main difficulty of reading the myth of Þórr's journey to Geirröðargarðr as a statement indicating the rightful submission of female agency to superior masculine strength and authority is the existence of the helpful giantess, Gríðr; Þórr, unaware of Loki's treachery and deprived of his own usual magical accoutrement, is reliant upon both the wisdom of the female figure and the objects she provides. That Þórr succeeds because of Gríðr's intervention is implied by his reliance on her staff, girdle and gauntlets in each trial he must overcome. Gríðr's role in the story is often sidelined by scholars, who focus instead on the violent sexual politics of the other encounters with giantesses, though it is perhaps tempting to view this as a convenient way of ignoring a loose end. McKinnell advances the most convincing explanation for Gríðr's existence, arguing that whilst 'The motivation of the helpful giantess is never explained, [...] she is a surrogate mother, assumed to have the motherly roles of feeding, protecting and advising her "son".'⁸³ The motif of the helpful giantess who acts as a foster mother is one that recurs frequently across Old Norse literature, and it is McKinnell's intention to read Gríðr in that light.⁸⁴ Though the argument is a persuasive one, there are certain issues with it: McKinnell's arguments against Clunies Ross's assertion that the river represents Þórr's mother Jörð also stand true for his assertion that Gríðr represents a mother-figure. Whilst it is certainly a possible, even a plausible, reading, there is limited evidence for it in the source texts: the concept of parenthood does not seem to be important in this myth. If the river does represent Jörð, then it must be asked why is it necessary for Þórr to fight his mother; if the river does not represent Jörð, then it must be asked why a surrogate mother

⁸² Arnold (2011) 32.

⁸³ McKinnell (1994) 65.

⁸⁴ See Ellis (1941) and Gallo (2006).

is used instead of Þórr's actual mother. The simplest explanation of the myth seems most likely: Þórr's contest with the giantesses is merely indicative of his usual pastime of fighting such figures and is not intended to be a coherent treatment of the general form of Þórr's relationships with alien women, as some scholars have implicitly suggested, and that Gríðr is a manifestation of the recurring trope of the obscure but helpful supernatural woman who aids the hero in time of need, but does not have to be viewed as a mother figure.

Whilst the Geirröðr myth is perhaps not as comprehensive in mapping out Þórr's approach to inter-gender relations as has been traditionally supposed, there are nevertheless some interesting and unique aspects that are worth exploring here, and that may suggest some readings that have been overlooked by previous scholars. Þórr's confrontations with Gjálp and Greip have, as mentioned above, been viewed as indicative of a dominating and sexually charged male response to powerful female figures, in terms of the penetrative act of casting a stone at the female genitals and the phallic connotations of the staff that is used to break their backs. The mechanics of these situations, however, can be read as suggesting more than the mere dominance of the female. When Þórr casts his stone at Gjálp's genitals, we are told that he stems the flood of urine/menstrual blood, from which we must infer that the stone has not only penetrated the vagina, but has also blocked it: the fact that the flow does not resume suggests that the blockage is not immediately rectifiable by the giantess. This is more than the domination of female sexuality: it is the denial of female sexuality, the metaphorical castration of the giantess by the act of blocking her sexual organ.

The method by which Þórr kills Gjálp and Greip has similar connotations if one considers closely the mechanics of the situation. If giantesses' backs are broken by the application of extreme pressure from the chair they are trying to push above them, then it would most likely involve their being crushed face-down into the floor, an act that would obscure their breasts from view; if the primary sexual organ, the vagina, is obliterated in

the first encounter, then the second encounter possibly represents the negation of the secondary sexual organs, the breasts.⁸⁵ Monstrous giantesses are most often depicted as physical grotesques:⁸⁶ if these two giantesses might be imagined as physically repulsive, the prone and beaten bodies, lying face down to obscure their breasts, would lack any obvious gender indicators, which would at the very least lead to an uncertainty or ambiguity about their gender if observed by any third party. By the time Þórr has finished his contest with Gjálp and Greip, it is possible to read the situation as one where he has deprived them of their female attributes, and that one may infer that this was a necessary step in overcoming their power. Þórr, in essence, through his actions creates a new and androgynous identity for these two giantesses, which simultaneously allows him to defeat them.

The other aspect of the standard interpretation of this myth that needs examining in more detail is the relationship between the giantess and the river. A simpler reading of the situation can be argued from the basic premise of Clunies Ross's earth-as-mother argument. Rather than linking the river specifically with Þórr's mother, it could be argued instead that it is indicative of a broader literary association between female power and the natural world, particularly its destructive aspects.⁸⁷ The mixture of female urine/menstrual blood into the river suggests the co-identification of the dual images of flowing liquids: the river parallels one of the female body's distinguishing physical features. The image of the river swelling with the discharge of the female sexual organ combines the ideas of dangerous nature and female sexual functions into a single threat against a male figure. In this sense, it is possible to view Þórr's contest against the river as an element of his contest

⁸⁵ Lindow (1988) 130, alternatively, views the breaking of the spines as 'an inverted act of intercourse'.

⁸⁶ Jóhanna Katrín Fríðriksdóttir (2013b) 62-4.

⁸⁷ See, for example, McKinnell (2005) 69-80, Gunnell (1995) 128-30, and Motz (1984a) 157-60.

against female figures in general. The god's characteristic association with wading may, consequently, reflect an element of the recurring nature of this contest.⁸⁸

The juxtaposition between Þórr and the image of the woman as a representative of untamed and dangerous nature gains further credibility when one considers the evidence we have for Þórr's primary function as an object of worship, as described by Adam of Bremen, which is as a fertility god.⁸⁹ It seems likely that this aspect of Adam's testimonial has some historical accuracy, and scholars have, in consequence, consistently argued that Þórr is the deity who presides over agriculture.⁹⁰ He represents nature, therefore, in its domesticated form: nature redefined as that which sustains rather than that which imperils humanity. Jens Peter Schjødt has recently argued that Þórr's link to agriculture is not tied to any element of personal sexuality or fertility, but is directly linked to his role as warrior: he defends the fertility of land against the agents of chaos who represent its destructive aspect; he kills to secure life.⁹¹ Schjødt's reasoning is convincing, but the argument can be extended if one takes into account the gendered mechanics of the situation. Schjødt lays great emphasis on Þórr's suitability as a defender of fertility on the grounds that he possesses 'the mightiest weapon of all, the hammer Mjǫlnir', but does not read anything further into it, nor does he ascribe any notional gender to the forces of chaos that Þórr fights against.⁹² If one accepts the connection between the threatening and destructive aspects of the natural world and some kind of essential femaleness, then Þórr's guardianship of the land takes on a deeper level of meaning. The fertility of the land and its life-sustaining qualities are secured by a masculine god wielding a phallic weapon against a feminised aspect of chaos. The Geirröðr episode can consequently be seen to reflect this concept, and is thus by no means a self-contained vignette but rather a story born out of a

⁸⁸ See, for example. *Grímnismál* 29.

⁸⁹ Adam of Bremen (1917) 257-60.

⁹⁰ See Arnold (2011) 40-2 and Schjødt (2012) 64-7.

⁹¹ Schjødt (2012) 69-70.

⁹² Schjødt (2012) 70

much wider idea concerning Þórr's interaction with empowered women, and his position within the Old Norse cosmos.

Other sources describe Þórr's relationships with women outside his domestic circle. In general terms, one of the most significant configurations of Þórr's character is that of his role as the universal enemy of giants of both genders, a role in which he is universally recognized.⁹³ This is perhaps most comprehensively expressed in the eddic poem *Hárbarðsljóð*, the conceit of which is a semi-humorous flyting between the Þórr and the ferryman Hárbarðr, who, it is strongly implied, is Óðinn in disguise.⁹⁴ In this poem, the latter's history of sexual conquests is increasingly juxtaposed with the former's martial conquests of giantesses, much to Þórr's frustration. There are, however, elements of this poem that serve subtly to undermine Þórr's role of protector of the world against feminised threats. There is an implicit condemnation of Þórr's activities relative to those of Hárbarðr, the unvoiced assertion being that Hárbarðr's use of giantesses (as sex objects) is more acceptable and socially normal than Þórr's use of them as worthy physical opponents. This thread of their argument culminates in Hárbarðr making the implicit condemnation explicit: '*Klæki vanntu þá, Þórr, er þú á konom barðir.*' 'You did a disgraceful thing then, Þórr, when you attacked women with blows.'⁹⁵ Þórr's angry response is very telling: '*Vargynior þat vóro, en varla konor!*' 'They were she-wolves, and hardly women!'⁹⁶ Þórr's words here are open to a variety of interpretations, and it is worth bearing in mind that his speech is the final word on the subject, as following this the argument between the two figures changes topic. First, Þórr's response does not in fact refute Hárbarðr's assertion, which implicitly suggests that the taunt has a measure of validity: it is a

⁹³ For example, Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 14 instructs that skalds may refer to Þórr as the *dólgr ok bani jötna ok trollkvinna* 'enemy and killer of giants and troll-wives'. A fuller discussion of the various attestations to Þórr's giantess-killing abilities can be found in Lindow (1988) 119-36.

⁹⁴ For a discussion of the genre of '*Hárbarðsljóð*', and how the poem fits into the wider context of Norse literature, see Clover (2002a).

⁹⁵ '*Hárbarzlióð*' 38.

⁹⁶ '*Hárbarzlióð*' 39.

disgraceful thing to attack a woman, and thus Þórr's boasts cannot be accepted unconditionally. Second, Þórr's response is defensive in tone: though it emphasises the monstrous qualities of the foes he has faced, the second element, *en varla konor*, in fact serves to diminish their femininity. As a vocal tactic, it is not an attempt to refute Hárbarðr's assertion that violence against women is a disgraceful thing, but rather it suggests that Hárbarðr's judgement does not apply in this case. It is Þórr's attempt to achieve vocally the same effect he achieved physically in the Geirröðr myth: he acts to redefine the figure he faces, rendering the woman as non-woman in order to make victory over her less problematic.

These two texts approach the idea from different directions, but the ultimate conclusion is the same: in the Geirröðr myth Þórr actively diminishes the femininity of the giantess to reduce her power to oppose him; in *Hárbarðsljóð* he does it to avoid transgressing a social norm by fighting with her. The defeminisation of the giantesses in *Hárbarðsljóð*, furthermore, serves to undermine Hárbarðr's implicit assertion that the correct usage of them is as sexual partners: by denying their female qualities, Þórr also removes the prospect of their sexual appeal, which itself raises the spectre of transgressing social norms through the possibility that sexual intercourse with a non-woman would constitute *argr* behaviour.⁹⁷ In short, Þórr's response of defeminisation simultaneously justifies his use of violence towards these figures and excuses him from not having used them as a sex object, all whilst not suffering any aspersion upon his manly qualities.

In view of the potential problematising of violence against giant women in a poem that is as celebratory of Þórr's exploits as *Hárbarðsljóð* appears to be on a surface level, the question is raised of whether a similar reading can be applied to other texts. A brief consideration of violence against empowered female figures in the poem *Prymskviða*, a

⁹⁷ Bestiality being seen as a component of *argr* behaviour is codified in several early medieval Germanic law codes, most notably the Gulaping and Uplandslag codes; see Meißner (1935) 123 and von Schwerin (1935) 35.

fuller analysis of which will follow towards the end of this section (see 1.2.4.), would seem to be less controversial: the likely intent of the poem is to mock, rather than disgrace,

Þórr.⁹⁸ The poem ends with the following stanza:

Dráp hann ina öldno iotna systur,
hin er brúðféar of beðit hafði;
hon skell um hlaut fyr skillinga,
en högg hamars fyr hringa fiöld.

[He killed the old sister of giants, she who had asked for a bride-gift; she took a beating instead of shillings, a hammer's blow instead of a multitude of rings.]⁹⁹

The compiler of the poem clearly felt that the image of Þórr killing a giantess was a suitable way to bring the story to a conclusion: following the god's potentially embarrassing performance as a woman, this signifies a welcome return to normality. The ending, furthermore, fits well with the comedic intent of the poem: the stupidity and vulgarity of the giants is rewarded with slaughter, and in particular the greed of Þórr's would-be sister-in-law is comically sent up by her quite literally receiving the bride-gift blunt-end first and at speed. Within the context of this poem, the audience seems intended to view the ending in a positive light, and see the destruction of the giants as entirely merited.¹⁰⁰ It is worth noting, however, that the poet tactfully avoids giving any kind of description of the slaughter: there are no gruesome details reminiscent of the shattering spines in the Geirröðr myth. This is most likely because such descriptions would deflate the comic purpose of the ending by miring it in technical detail. If one considers, however, the nature of the attack, then it does possess an underlying sense of disquiet: Þórr has infiltrated this gathering through a mixture of disguise and deceit, and waits for the opportune moment to strike, which is when his enemies have placed his weapon in his

⁹⁸ McKinnell (2000) 3-4.

⁹⁹ 'Þrymskviða' 32.

¹⁰⁰ Clunies Ross (2002) 181.

lap.¹⁰¹ Given how invested the poem is in Þórr's personal sense of honour, his dishonourable behaviour, insofar as he is an invited guest who launches a surprise attack on his host, is noteworthy, even if it is being used for a comic purpose.¹⁰² Giants and giantesses may be Þórr's traditional enemies, but it is hard to escape the thought that, viewed dispassionately, Þórr has behaved at least as dishonourably as they have.

In view of this reading, it can be argued that there is in fact a disparity between Þórr's reputation as the enemy of monstrous and powerful females, and the actual reality that the literature presents of his exploits. Snorri's instruction to skalds that Þórr may be referred to as the *dólgr ok bani jötna ok trollkvinna* 'enemy and killer of giants and troll-wives' seems to suggest that his interactions with these empowered and malevolent alien figures are the same, regardless of their gender.¹⁰³ In the direct literary evidence for Þórr's encounters with these figures, the manner in which Þórr deals with male and female giants differs markedly. When fighting male giants, in almost all cases Þórr favours a direct, open and undisguised face-to-face brawl. The main examples of this from the eddic materials include Þórr's aforementioned battle with Geirröðr (see above), his killing of the offending giant in the Master-Builder tale (alluded to in *Völuspá*, and recounted in *Gylfaginning* 42),¹⁰⁴ his fishing trip and subsequent fight with Hymir's band (recounted in both *Hymiskviða* and *Gylfaginning* 48),¹⁰⁵ his final confrontation with Útgarða-Loki (*Gylfaginning* 47),¹⁰⁶ and the attack on Hrungnir (recounted in the skaldic poem *Haustlög* and *Skáldskaparmál* 17).¹⁰⁷ To this list we might justifiably add his final encounter with the Miðgarðsormr who, whilst not himself a typical giant, is the offspring of two giants

¹⁰¹ The act of placing the hammer in the bride's lap is likely the echo of a pre-Christian consecration ritual. See Lindow (1994) 489-91.

¹⁰² Clunies Ross (2002) 185.

¹⁰³ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 14.

¹⁰⁴ 'Völuspá' 25-6 and *Gylfaginning* (2005) 34-6.

¹⁰⁵ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 43-5.

¹⁰⁶ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 42-3.

¹⁰⁷ Þjóðólfr of Hvinr (1997) 8-10 (stanzas 14-20) and *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 20-2.

(recounted in *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning* 51),¹⁰⁸ and also his willingness to attack Loki, who shares a relationship with the giants (multiple examples, including *Lokasenna*, *Gylfaginning* 50 and *Skáldskaparmál* 35).¹⁰⁹ What this suggests, in fact, is that Þórr's approach in pursuing Þrymr in *Þrymskviða* is highly uncharacteristic of him: in all other instances he forgoes the use of disguise or deceit, preferring instead direct and unadulterated violence in his dealings with male giants. Indeed, Þórr alone is excused from the deception and oath-breaking that the rest of the divine assembly commit in Snorri's fleshed-out version of the Master-Builder story; great emphasis is laid on his absence at the beginning, and he has to be specifically summoned to come and deal with the now angry and combative giant.¹¹⁰

One story element that *Þrymskviða* possesses which the others mentioned here do not, however, is the presence of a powerful and antagonistic female figure: Þórr's would-be sister-in-law. The poet focuses on this figure, particularly with regard to her defeat: the slaughter of Þrymr and all his giants is described in only the last half of the penultimate stanza, but the entirety of the last stanza (quoted above), and thus the final image of the poem, is given over to a clever and detailed description of the beating the sister-in-law receives.¹¹¹ One could argue that the presence of an antisocial and threatening female figure at the climax of the poem in fact has a wide effect on the construction of the story as a whole, and that Þórr's uncharacteristically duplicitous behaviour is to some extent an aspect of his standard aggressive dealings with giantesses. That fact that his final combat is ultimately against a female figure is in some sense being used by the poet to justify the means by which Þórr comes to the conflict.

¹⁰⁸ 'Völuspá' 55 and *Gylfaginning* (2005) 50.

¹⁰⁹ 'Lokasenna' 57-65, *Gylfaginning* (2005) 48-9 and *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 41-3.

¹¹⁰ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 34-6.

¹¹¹ 'Þrymskviða' 31-2.

Despite Þórr's reputation as a slayer of giantesses and troll-women, there are actually very few direct accounts of him meeting them in a straight and uncomplicated combat situation; indeed, his contest with the daughters of Geirröðr arguably represents the only episode which is related first hand to the reader where this is the case. This section will now conclude by addressing two episodes in which Þórr openly and aggressively confronts alien female figures, and will suggest some of the implications of them for our understanding of gender-relations and empowered female images in the divine realm.

Other than the daughters of Geirröðr and the sister-in-law in *Þrymskviða*, the only giantess that Þórr is observed contesting with, in any of the extant literature, is the figure of Hyrrokkin, who is found only in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* 49.¹¹² She is associated with Baldr's funeral, to which she has been invited by the gods and at which she provides some kind of official function by launching the boat that will bear Baldr's corpse, which the gods themselves are unable to do. According to Lindow, Snorri's description of Baldr's funeral is likely to be the only part of his narrative about the god's death that can 'confidently' be taken to reflect pre-Christian social practices.¹¹³ As a consequence, the figure of Hyrrokkin may be a response to some very old ideas, in which case Þórr's interactions with her are important. Snorri describes the event thus:

Þá var sent í Jötunheima eptir gýgi þeiri er Hyrrokkin hét. En er hon kom ok reið vargi ok hafði höggorm at taumum þá hljóp hon af hestinum, en Óðinn kallaði til berserki fjóra at gæta hestsins, ok fengu þeir eigi haldit nema þeir feldi hann. Þá gekk Hyrrokkin á framstafn nokkvans ok hratt fram í fyrsta viðbragði svá at eldr hraut ór hlunnunum ok lönð qll skulfu. Þá varð Þórr reiðr ok greip hamarinn ok myndi þá brjóta höfuð hennar áðr en goðin qll báðu henni friðar.

¹¹² There is a certain degree of manuscript variation concerning Hyrrokkin's name; Lindow (1988) 125 addresses these variations, and comes to the conclusion that Hyrrokkin is probably the original intention.

¹¹³ Lindow (1997) 69.

[Then they sent to Jötunheimr for a giantess who was called Hyrrokkin. And when she arrived she was riding a wolf and had serpents for reins. Then she dismounted from her steed, and Óðinn called for four berserkers to take care of the steed, and they were not able to hold it unless when they knocked it down. Then Hyrrokkin went to the boat's prow and launched it with the first touch, so that fire flew from the rollers and all lands shook. Then Þórr became angry and grabbed the hammer and was about to smash her head, but then all the gods begged grace for her.]¹¹⁴

Whilst the exact function of Hyrrokkin is not well understood, Þórr's behaviour in this episode also requires some explanation.¹¹⁵ The antipathy between the gods and giantesses may be well established, but it is clear that the normal rules do not apply in this situation. Hyrrokkin is an invited guest, welcomed by Óðinn himself and shown hospitality, suggesting that Þórr can be seen to be acting inappropriately when he attempts to attack her. According to Snorri, he is prevailed upon not to assault Hyrrokkin; the only other extant reference to Hyrrokkin, however, suggests either an alternative end to the story or else a sequel of some kind: she is listed amongst the giants that Þórr has killed in a stanza attributed to Þorbjörn díarskáld, and which is preserved only in *Skáldskaparmál* 4.¹¹⁶ As previously mentioned, a great deal about Snorri's description of Baldr's funeral is imperfectly understood, but there is clearly something about Hyrrokkin's presence that greatly troubles Þórr, to the extent that he is willing to break the rules of hospitality. The implication here seems to be that his behaviour is a reaction to her demonstration of strength regarding the launching of the boat.¹¹⁷ The simplest explanation is that Þórr feels he is being outdone by this powerful female figure, and his attempt to kill her is a means of

¹¹⁴ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 46.

¹¹⁵ Lindow (2001) 196-7.

¹¹⁶ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 17. For some other skaldic verses which potentially relate to Þórr's slaying of Hyrrokkin, see Lindow (1988) 119-20.

¹¹⁷ Lindow (1997) 88 suggests there may have been an earlier version of the myth in which Hyrrokkin was the slayer of Baldr, thus explaining Þórr's anger. If this was the case, the myth has been lost and so we must deal with what texts we do have.

re-establishing himself as the strongest person present. One can consequently observe a similar social dynamic to that which characterised a large part of the Geirröðr episode: the masculine power of Þórr is being contested against the strength of a specifically female supernatural figure, and his response is to attempt to change the identity of his female foe, in this case by challenging her unspoken assertion of dominant strength and obliterating her head, the main physical marker of her individual identity.

The casual ease with which Hyrrokkin launches the boat, and the strength of the mount on which she arrives, all seemed designed to be provocative behaviour, an assertion of her personal strength and ability to act in traditionally male roles.¹¹⁸ The male gods are, by implication, all emasculated by Hyrrokkin's feats of strength, but it is Þórr alone, the hyper-masculine god, who is aggrieved to the point of violence. That Þórr is acting in an incorrect and unacceptable way is demonstrated by the response of his fellow deities who, despite their own emasculation, rush to the defence of their natural enemy against their own champion. By implication, this particular violent assault on, and attempted redefinition of, female power would be a step too far, a dishonourable act. This interpretation raises the idea that there is a certain extremism to Þórr's actions concerning women: not only is he willing to engage female figures directly in battle, but he is also willing to act dishonourably to force a confrontation with an empowered female.

The second of Þórr's problematic contests is with Elli, an old crone with whom Þórr must wrestle as his final trial in the Útgarða-Loki episode of *Gylfaginning*.¹¹⁹ Þórr loses this match as, unbeknownst to him, Elli is in fact the embodiment of old age. Útgarða-Loki rationalises Þórr's defeat at the hands of the old woman by explaining that *engi hefir sá orðit, ok engi mun verða ef svá gamall er at elli bíðr, at eigi komi ellin qllum til falls* 'there has not been anyone, and there will not be if he is old enough to experience

¹¹⁸ Lindow (1997) 89.

¹¹⁹ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 42.

old age, whom old age will not bring to his knees.’¹²⁰ Surprisingly little academic attention has been paid to Elli, though McKinnell has suggested two different readings of her character: first, that she may represent an inversion of the helpful mother figure, and secondly that she serves an allegorical purpose in demonstrating Þórr’s everyman qualities by emphasising that he too is ultimately beaten by old age.¹²¹ The first suggestion, that she is an inverted mother figure, seems the more compelling of the two arguments: Elli is referred to in terms of maternal functions, with Útgarða-Loki calling her *kerlinguna fóstur mína* ‘the old woman, my foster-mother’.¹²² Despite the fact that her function as the embodiment of old age and the ruination it causes might be seen as opposite to the nurturing qualities of the correctly functioning mother figure, the maternal form is nevertheless the form in which her character is presented. The problems with this reading, however, are first that Elli’s designation as Útgarða-Loki’s foster-mother is most probably read as a plausible lie to explain the crone’s presence, a lie given by a giant who has lied about every other contest thus far, and secondly that Þórr does not succeed in beating her, and thus does not free himself of the image of his mother.

The other reading of Elli, that she represents a force which beats even the strongest of men, is also problematic. The gods are notionally subject to age, but it is the function of the goddess Iðunn to postpone this eventuality; the gods can, and do, beat old age.¹²³ As protector of the gods, Þórr is also the protector of Iðunn; with her bounty on his side, there is no impetus for the god to fall before old age (for a full discussion of Iðunn’s function, see 2.2.3 below). The other issue, of course, is that the circumstances of Þórr’s death, in combat with the Miðgarðsormr, are both well attested and consistent between sources. Þórr, quite simply, does not live long enough to be subject to old age; even if it is Snorri’s

¹²⁰ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 43.

¹²¹ McKinnell (1994) 84 and (2005) 118 respectively.

¹²² *Gylfaginning* (2005) 42.

¹²³ For an overview of Iðunn’s appearances and critical analyses, see Simek (1993) 171-2.

intention that old age should be nothing more than a temporary inconvenience for Þórr, Elli is not a logical choice for Þórr's final opponent in this contest in the way that the Miðgarðsormr, another force behind one of the illusions, might have been.

Elli may therefore represent a force that is undefeatable in general terms, but it does not seem viable to suggest that this aspect of her character has been tailored to answer something specific about Þórr's condition. I suggest, instead, that the most important aspect of the contest is not the force that lies behind the illusion of Elli, but rather the nature of the illusion itself. No physical description of Elli is given, though Útgarða-Loki explicitly summons her because she is the best match for Þórr's relatively short stature; if Elli is disguised as a giantess, then she is not a physically imposing one.¹²⁴ Although the illusion may be a devious one, Útgarða-Loki's apparent choice of his own elderly wet-nurse as a contestant is fully intended as a final crushing insult to the already angry and humiliated Þórr. The most important aspect of the power game being played here, however, is the fact that Þórr accepts the challenge. Unaware that Elli is the embodiment of a universal force, Þórr is willing to enter into combat with an old crone whose social function is far removed from the battlefield. Útgarða-Loki's offer is intended to dishonour Þórr, but it is ultimately Þórr's decision to accept that dishonour. Whilst the revelation that Útgarða-Loki's trials have all been illusions serves to emphasise that Þórr really is a mighty figure, given how close his strength came to breaking these illusions, it does not serve to excuse Þórr morally for any of his actions. The reality of Þórr's strength is accompanied by the open acknowledgement that he is willing to use it in an ethically questionable manner. This, perhaps, might explain why Elli is the last trial that Þórr's group face: Útgarða-Loki has demonstrated that not only is Þórr's strength imperfect, but so too is his character, and thus the giant gains some measure of victory.

¹²⁴ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 42.

In all of Þórr's dealings with alien women there can be observed a definite misogynistic undercurrent. Whilst Þórr is almost always willing to engage male enemies openly and without complication, his response to female enemies is much more ambiguous. As has been demonstrated, these aggressive engagements are characterised either by a willingness to commit ethically questionable acts in order to force a confrontation, or in the confrontation itself a tendency on Þórr's part to attempt to diminish, obliterate, or ignore the female nature of his adversaries: these tactics serve to redefine the opponents against which the god contests, and represent a desire to change or alter them in a way which is much less evident in his fights with male figures.

1.2.3. The Politics of Þórr's Family

This section will consider the ways in which Þórr is portrayed interacting with the women of his own domestic circle. Whilst a number of mythological episodes describe Þórr dealing with his female enemies, relatively few in fact deal with his friendly relationships with women. Þórr's interactions with the women of his social circle are both less frequent and less detailed than his encounters with the various alien and antagonistic women discussed above. This, in itself, informs us about the manner in which the writers of the material conceptualize Þórr, and the scenarios on which they focus: generally speaking, Þórr is not often located in a domestic environment, or an actor in a domestic situation.

Compared to the other prominent male deities, Þórr seems curiously undersexed. Indeed, it has been noted that, for all that he functions as a fertility god (as discussed in 1.2.2. above), he is almost never connected with the theme of sexuality, or the concept of pleasure within sex.¹²⁵ Þórr's erotic links are tenuous and ill-defined, he being linked sexually with only two figures: Sif, his wife, and the giantess Járnsaxa. This latter figure is particularly problematic: whilst other gods' dalliances with giantesses are well attested and

¹²⁵ Schjødtt (2012) 68-9.

explored, almost nothing is related of Járnþaxa's nature and the character of her relationship with Þórr. She is mentioned briefly in *Snorra Edda* at several points: she is termed the mother of Magni (*Skáldskaparmál* 17),¹²⁶ Sif is referred to as *elja Járnþöxu* 'rival wife of Járnþaxa' (*Skáldskaparmál* 21),¹²⁷ and her name is included in Snorri's list of names for troll-wives (*Skáldskaparmál* 75).¹²⁸ The ambiguity of Járnþaxa is further complicated by the fact that her sole attestation outside of Snorri's work is in the *Völuspá in skamma* section of the poem *Hyndluljóð*, where she is in no way linked with Þórr, but instead is presented as one of the nine mothers of Heimdallr.¹²⁹

Þórr's legitimate wife, Sif, is almost as ambiguous a figure as his giantess lover. Though she does not serve an apparent specific function, the scholarly consensus has followed Jacob Grimm in viewing her as some kind of agricultural fertility deity designed to compliment Þórr's own role in that area.¹³⁰ Another common view is that Sif serves as the embodiment, or perhaps prototype, of the standard wifely image, an argument often made on the basis of the etymology of her name and Þórr's apparent function as a consecrator of marriage.¹³¹

Whilst Sif's partial function as a fertility goddess seems both appropriate and plausible, issue must be taken with the second reading that she represents a model wife: though there is scant literary evidence for her exploits, what there is suggests that her domestic life with Þórr is far from ideal. Sif's actions are attested twice in the corpus of eddic poetry. In *Hárbarðsljóð*, Hárbarðr tells Þórr that Sif has taken a lover behind his back, and in *Lokasenna* Loki claims to have had sex with her.¹³² Though one might question the objectivity and honesty of the two figures who report Þórr's cuckoldry, it must

¹²⁶ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 22.

¹²⁷ *Skáldskaparmál* 30.

¹²⁸ *Skáldskaparmál* 112.

¹²⁹ 'Hyndluljóð' 37.

¹³⁰ Simek (1993) 283.

¹³¹ See, for example, Clunies Ross (1994a) 72-3.

¹³² 'Hárbarðsljóð' 48 and 'Lokasenna' 53-4.

nevertheless be observed that on the two occasions that Sif's actions are described, they both feature the theme of her unfaithfulness to Þórr. Sif also appears as an active character in *Snorra Edda* on three occasions. She appears briefly in the *Prologue* where she is described as a *spákona* 'seeress' whose name is a contraction or a diminutive of Síþíl; as with most of the details of the *Prologue*, the image of Sif here is very different from her portrayal elsewhere in *Snorra Edda* and the wider context of Norse mythology.¹³³ The only other instances in which Sif plays an active role in a mythological story are when she is established as one of the two goddesses, along with Freyja, who are the objects of the giant Hrungr's lust (*Skáldskaparmál* 17), and when she is the victim of one of Loki's cruel pranks, in that he shaves her head (*Skáldskaparmál* 35).¹³⁴

Sif does not demonstrate a great deal of individual agency in her various literary appearances. In *Lokasenna* alone is she actually observed taking action of some kind on her own initiative, which is quickly countered by Loki, to whom she offers no reply.¹³⁵ In Snorri's text, though she often serves to motivate the plot, she herself does not usually feature as an actor. It is also important to note that Sif's sexual nature is her defining feature in all these stories, particularly if one accepts Larrington's suggestion that Loki's assertion of Sif's infidelity with him would explain how he was able to get close enough to shave her hair.¹³⁶ These stories seem to suggest that whilst Sif is a sexualised being, Þórr's relationship with her is a distant one. When her honour is impugned in *Hárbarðsljóð*, Þórr is in a foreign land that is demonstrably far away from his wife; similarly, he is initially absent in both *Lokasenna* and the Hrungr episode, arriving only at the last minute and having come a great distance. The implication seems to be that Þórr is often away from his wife: the literature never presents an image of cosy domesticity, nor indeed of much

¹³³ *Prologue* (2005) 5.

¹³⁴ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 20-1 and 41-2 respectively.

¹³⁵ 'Lokasenna' 53-4.

¹³⁶ Larrington (1999) 276.

interaction between husband and wife at all. The emergence and prominence of Sif's sexuality is thus a counterweight to Þórr's own sexual inactivity, and comes at the cost of his status: her sexuality must find other outlets because her husband, by implication, is not satisfying her. The Hrungnir episode demonstrates Sif's sexual allure, whilst *Hárbarðsljóð* and *Lokasenna* reveal, and revel in, her willingness to engage in extramarital sex. Indeed, Clunies Ross has argued that Sif's entreaty in *Lokasenna*, the only moment in the entire mythology when she takes the centre stage, can be read as carrying an offer of sexual availability, an attempt to buy Loki's silence with her body.¹³⁷ Sif's offer to Loki of some mead in that poem is predicated on his willingness to assert that she, at least, is blameless amongst the gods: if it is an offer of sex, it is a self-sacrificing act designed to prevent Loki's final and total breach with divine society. Clunies Ross further argues that the purpose of this exchange between Loki and Sif is to highlight Loki's otherness and subordinate status, but another reading might be to suggest that it demonstrates that Sif possesses a degree of sexual freedom and generosity unusual amongst the Ásynjur.

It has often been argued that Þórr's military prowess is a subordinate function to that of his role as protector of the Æsir's sexual stock, and their hegemony over sexual access to the Ásynjur.¹³⁸ Another reading of Þórr's rapid homeward visits is to see not only the concept of protecting female sexuality, but in the case of Sif also the concept of suppressing it. Hárbarð's assertion that Sif has a lover is the last charge the ferryman levels against Þórr, and from that moment all of Þórr's desire in the poem is bent towards a rapid return home. When Hrungnir and Loki both reach the stage of treating Sif as a sexual object, Þórr appears forthwith to deal with them. Whether Sif is indeed offering herself to Loki or not hardly matters: whenever Sif is perceived in a sexual manner, Þórr appears to 'correct' the situation. If Sif is supposed to represent wifehood, then she is a wife whose

¹³⁷ Clunies Ross (1994b) 56-7.

¹³⁸ See, for example, Arnold (2011) 32.

agency in her own sexuality is under constant threat of compromise by a husband who seems to be both physically and emotionally distant, and who furthermore contrives to redefine her character in such a way as to remove its sexual aspects.

Another possible method of seeing into the relationship between Þórr and his wife and lover involves examining the god's offspring: Þrúðr, Móði and Magni. Paradoxically, the most interesting thing about Þórr's children is how uninteresting they in fact are: they are in no way as developed and diverse as the children of Óðinn, or as exotic as the menagerie that Loki propagates. Þrúðr is Þórr's daughter, as principally attested in kennings for her father;¹³⁹ it is unclear whether the daughter of Þórr who motivates the plot of the poem *Alvíssmál* is Þrúðr.¹⁴⁰ Regardless, *Alvíssmál* represents the only full account of the relationship between Þórr and a daughter figure, and the scholarly consensus is that a lot of the material of the poem is probably the invention of its author and not derived from other mythological materials.¹⁴¹ The only other reference to a story involving Þrúðr is found in a stanza of Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa*, preserved in *Snorra Edda*, where Hrungnir is referred to as her abductor, suggesting that in at least one (now lost) version of the story Þrúðr filled her mother's place as object of the giant's lust.¹⁴² These references, despite their brevity, agree with the concept of Þórr as a controller and regulator of female sexuality, and also a suppressor of it: though neither of Þrúðr's suitors are desirable, it is nevertheless true that Þórr refuses to relinquish control of his daughter's sexuality in all her few appearances, maintaining a hegemony of suppression over it that complements the habitual treatment of his wife's sexuality, and results, as above, in the destruction of the potential sexual partner, in much the same way as Hrungnir is destroyed in Snorri's account for his pursuit of Sif.

¹³⁹ Simek (1993) 329.

¹⁴⁰ Clunies Ross (1994a) 111 is inclined to believe that Þrúðr is the subject of *Alvíssmál*.

¹⁴¹ Simek (1993) 12-3.

¹⁴² *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 69.

Móði and Magni are, if anything, even more obscure than their sister; they are ill defined, and the identity of their mother(s) is uncertain.¹⁴³ The most notable quality of the three siblings, for this study, is that all three of their names betray their status as aspects of Þórr's own character: *þrúðr* 'mighty one', *móði* 'angry one', and *magni* 'strong one'.¹⁴⁴ The common view is that Þórr's children are largely a later creation whose rise to prominence was an attempt to redefine and emphasise the power of Þórr in response to the encroachment of Christianity.¹⁴⁵ This has several interesting implications; it may suggest that Þórr was originally a childless god, another factor which suggests either a disinterest in sex and/or a cool relationship with his wife. Regardless of the religious origin of Þórr's children, the bare-bones nature of their characterisation in the literature is extremely telling about the nature of the Þórr's complex relationship with female sexuality. The offspring appear entirely as aspects of their father, with no trace of their mothers' characteristics in them; furthermore, they never share the stage with their mother figures at any point in the extant texts. Sif and Járnsaxa are distanced from the procreative function, and depersonalised from it in such a way that the extant literature focuses exclusively on the relationship between, and similarity of, father and children. In Magni's sole major appearance, Snorri's version of the Hrungnir myth, his function is save his father by employing Þórr's trademark strength.¹⁴⁶ The survival of Magni and Móði in the post-*ragnarök* world described in *Vafþrúðnismál*, and their inheritance of their father's hammer, are indicative of the survival of Þórr's masculine qualities after his own death.¹⁴⁷ On a psychological level, this represents the highest point of Þórr's control over his females' sexual processes. His sexual partners are sidelined, controlled and rendered inert, allowed only to create facsimiles in the image of the father, over which he has sole authority. These

¹⁴³ Arnold (2011) 11.

¹⁴⁴ Translations of names given by Arnold (2011) 10.

¹⁴⁵ Simek (1993) 200-1.

¹⁴⁶ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 22.

¹⁴⁷ 'Vafþrúðnismál' 51.

children, whilst Þórr lives, support and protect him, and thus support and protect the patriarchal standards which he represents; after Þórr is dead, his sons allow for the continuation of these standards into the new world.

In conclusion, it can be suggested that Þórr's approach to his domestic life echoes the concerns of his dealings with antagonistic alien females. Whilst Þórr can counter independent female sexuality outside his own circle by means of brute force, the same emergence of female sexuality within his circle requires a similarly energetic response to moderate the situation. Ultimately, Þórr's relationship with women as a whole is one where female sexuality is something which must simultaneously be controlled, suppressed, and kept at a distance, all of which serve as tactics to change or redefine the role or character of the female in question.

1.2.4. Þórr and Cross-dressing

The final aspect of Þórr's negotiation with the theme of female power that is worthy of consideration is his engagement with the act of cross-dressing. According to the *Íslendingasögur*, the act of cross-dressing, or even the accusation of it, has serious implications of masculine personal honour: it is used as a major plot motivator in both *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*, for example.¹⁴⁸ This is primarily because cross-dressing is seen as indicative of *ergi*. This complex term (found also in its adjectival form *argr*) encompasses a variety of meanings, the exact configuration of which has been the subject of much scholarly debate.¹⁴⁹ It is generally agreed that it denotes one or more of the following implications: unmanliness, effeminacy, cowardice, homosexuality, sexual deviancy of any kind, and an affinity for the magical practice of *seiðr*. This last aspect in

¹⁴⁸ Meulengracht Sørensen (1983) 9-11.

¹⁴⁹ Most notably in Meulengracht Sørensen (1983), but more recently also in Price (2002), Tolley (2009), and Clark (2012).

particular has formed the basis of much modern debate.¹⁵⁰ Most notably, the perceived severity of the accusation of *ergi* is best exemplified by its status in law: according to the thirteenth-century Icelandic *Grágás*, the penalty for accusing someone of *argr* behaviour is full outlawry, the highest punishment the þing could mete out.¹⁵¹ Given the extreme social stigma attached to *argr* behaviour, it is thus very interesting that the three most prominent gods represented in the literary accounts of Norse mythology, Óðinn, Þórr and Loki, all at some point engage in cross-dressing activities.

As with his approach to women, Þórr's approach to cross-dressing is arguably the simplest relationship of the three gods under discussion here. The sole adventure in which Þórr dresses as a woman is contained in the poem *Þrymskviða*. As McKinnell notes of the poem, 'underneath the comic surface... there is a strong air of menace, and much of this has to do with sexual insecurity.'¹⁵² When this was discussed previously (in 1.2.2.), the focus was on the role of the female figure and Þórr's engagement with her; this section will consider the way in which Þórr approaches his own feminine nature. Given the social stigma which the act of cross-dressing carries in the realistic human society of the *Íslendingasögur*, one must initially consider whether the gods are beholden to the same set of laws. Þórr himself, in fact, draws attention to the dishonour of his action, saying '*Mik muno æsir argan kalla, ef ek bindaz læt brúðar lín*' 'The Æsir will call me *argr*, if I allow myself to be dressed in the headdress of a bride'.¹⁵³ Þórr, and thus the poet speaking through him, is in no sense attempting to downplay the situation. By stating the issue so matter-of-factly, *ergi* is being prominently placed as one of the defining themes of the poem. In another sense, however, Þórr's open and unadorned admission of *argr* behaviour

¹⁵⁰ In, for example, Price (2002), Tolley (2009), Mitchell (2011), and Ármann Jakobsson (2007), (2008b) and (2011).

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Meulengracht Sørensen (1983) 17.

¹⁵² McKinnell (2000) 4.

¹⁵³ 'Þrymskviða' 17.

serves to defuse the situation: since he acknowledges it himself, no one else is able to level the accusation, thus meaning there is no basis for feud amongst the gods. It also, furthermore, underscores the severity of the situation by demonstrating the lengths that Þórr is willing to go to in order to retrieve his hammer: what he is doing may be undignified in the extreme, but the continuation of the gods and their world is openly under threat. Þórr's assumption of female dress is thus in an odd sense heroic: it demonstrates a willingness to shoulder the burden of the worst dishonour for the greater good of the social group.¹⁵⁴

Another aspect of Þórr's cross-dressing which must be taken into account is his degree of proficiency in imitating a female role. Þórr's honour is in some sense protected by the fact that his impersonation of a female is so dreadful: a contemporary audience would probably have mentally pictured a man with some feminised attributes, but who nevertheless looked nothing like a woman.¹⁵⁵ He is 'as transparently manly as the cross-dressing male leads of British pantomime.'¹⁵⁶ The obviousness of Þórr's masculinity is principally used for comedic effect to underscore the stupidity of the giants, but it also serves to reassure the audience of Þórr's undiminished masculine qualities. Great emphasis is laid not only on the superficiality of his transformation, but also on how thin that superficial layer is. It has even been argued that, on a lexical level, the poem doggedly retains the use of masculine titles for Þórr whilst, as if to emphasise the difference, Loki is almost exclusively given female or gender-neutral pronouns or nicknames.¹⁵⁷ As this thesis will explore in later sections (1.3.3. and 1.4.2.), when Óðinn and Loki engage in cross-dressing there is a clear intention to gain access to some kind of abstract and utilisable transgendered power, but this is clearly not the case with Þórr. Though there is undeniably

¹⁵⁴ McKinnell (2000) 8-9.

¹⁵⁵ McKinnell (2000) 6

¹⁵⁶ Clunies Ross (2002) 182.

¹⁵⁷ McKinnell (2000) 6.

a gender anxiety at the heart of the poem, it is ultimately resolved: Þórr's personal engagement with a feminising process is rendered uncontroversial by the fact that it does not fundamentally change him, and that he ultimately casts it off.¹⁵⁸ Even the symbolic castration that it has been argued the removal of his hammer represents can be undone precisely because it is a symbol;¹⁵⁹ it is not something that damages the body, but simply an image that lies on top of it, a temporary form of self-redefinition. The return to normality, both in terms of Þórr's individual status and that of the universe as a whole, is demonstrated in the poem's ending that is 'satisfyingly positive for the proponents of the *status quo*'.¹⁶⁰

The casting off of the disguise brings us back to the final images of the poem, and particularly the fight with the would-be sister-in-law; as Lindow has noted, the focus on Prymr's sister rather than Prymr himself in the final stanza is 'significant'.¹⁶¹ It has already suggested (in 1.2.2. above) that there is an inner tension in *Þrymskviða* that affects the way in which it is possible to perceive the honour, or otherwise, of Þórr's direct actions in this poem: the infiltration through deceit and disguise, the sudden attack from a position of concealment, and the assault on the female figure. Þórr's assault on the giantess takes on a new meaning in light of his cross-dressing: in destroying an image of monstrous female power, he is emphatically rejecting and repudiating the same image that until that point was superimposed on himself. As a representation of the alien and empowered female, her defeat is necessary to ensure the sole dominance of Þórr's masculinity within the definition of his own character. Finally, one could suggest that the act of cross-dressing has a profound effect on the honour dynamics of the poem, and it perhaps explains why the

¹⁵⁸ McKinnell (2000) 8-9 presents the opposite argument, that Þórr cannot reclaim his military honour in view of the sexual disgrace he has brought upon himself. The fact that Þórr does cast off the female disguise, and does ultimately succeed in his military endeavour, can however be used to suggest that Þórr does emerge from this situation untarnished.

¹⁵⁹ Clunies Ross (1994a) 109.

¹⁶⁰ Clunies Ross (2002) 181.

¹⁶¹ Lindow (1988) 128.

potentially dishonourable nature of Þórr's attack upon his hosts seems of minor concern. With *argr* behaviour being so centrally placed and openly avowed in the poem, it in some sense eclipses other questionable actions. When a particularly grotesque dishonourable act is committed, it has a tendency to sideline all other smaller acts of dishonour with the text. Paradoxically, therefore, Þórr's engagement with his female aspect is in fact empowering, although less directly than we shall see with Óðinn and Loki. Þórr's appearance as a woman not only obscures the underhandedness of his other actions, but in fact excuses them: they are minor dishonours carried out, of necessity, to efface the far greater dishonour of *argr* behaviour. The feminised power that Þórr obtains in essence frees him from social constraint, he being safe in the knowledge that when he is able to cast off the stain of *ergi*, he simultaneously disowns any of the actions he carried out whilst in female form.

1.3. Óðinn

1.3.1. Introduction

When contrasting Óðinn with Þórr, it is important to remember that whilst Þórr can be perceived to some extent as a cosmic everyman, his father emphatically cannot. Óðinn's defining characteristic is his inscrutability, the reader more often than not being left to infer or imagine the purpose behind any action he takes. Whereas a majority of Þórr's interactions with empowered women can be seen as to some extent indicative of a general opposition between male and female power, Óðinn's actions are much more specific to himself.

The importance of Óðinn cannot be underestimated. He represents the aristocratic type, a *de facto* king at the top of a patriarchal social grouping that echoes the construction of human royal society; according to Simek, he 'personifies the function of sovereignty in Germanic mythology.'¹⁶² It is worth noting, however, that whilst Óðinn to some extent symbolizes kingship, he is not an 'everyking'; he is not presented as an ideal to which human kings should aspire. He is, nevertheless, the lynchpin of Norse mythology, the focal point around which the entire world revolves.¹⁶³ In light of this, it is no surprise that his engagements with powerful female figures, and the way in which he reacts to them, are both frequent and described in detail. To some extent, the frequency and diversity of Óðinn's interactions with empowered females presents this thesis with a structural problem, as a prohibitively large amount of material could be included in a section concerning Óðinn. This section, therefore, will deal with Óðinn's general approach to empowered females, and specifically his own personal engagement with feminised notions of power; his relationship with delineated female groups, such as the *völur* and the norms,

¹⁶² Simek (1993) 241.

¹⁶³ For a thorough survey of all of Óðinn's many appearances in Old Norse literature, see Lassen (2011) 266-307. For a detailed description of Óðinn's appearances outside of the mythological texts discussed here, see Lassen (2005).

will be covered in the sections that focus on them (3.4.2. and 3.2.2. respectively), although mention will be made of these relationships to examine how they reflect specifically on Óðinn's own character.

1.3.2. The Forms of Óðinn's Female Relationships

It was possible to separate Þórr's interactions with females into two categories of external and domestic situations; this is less easily done with Óðinn, not only because he is a very different figure from Þórr, but also because the literature treats his exploits in a more complex and mysterious way.¹⁶⁴ Óðinn's patronage is wide-ranging, covering more aspects of existence than any other single Norse deity: he is the god of poetry, of the aristocracy, of death and the dead, of war, of magic, of runes, and of ecstasy.¹⁶⁵ The etymology of his name is uncertain, though possible roots include 'frenzy', 'poetry', or 'leader of the possessed'.¹⁶⁶ In Snorri's *Gylfaginning*, the figure of Þriði (himself some aspect or representation of Óðinn) describes Óðinn as *æztr ok elztr Ásanna. Hann ræðr qllum hlutum, ok svá sem qnnur guðin eru máttug, þá þjóna honum qll svá sem börn fǫður* 'highest and oldest of the Æsir. He rules all things, and though the other gods are mighty, they all serve him as children do a father.'¹⁶⁷ The overall picture of the god is wide-ranging but hedged with ambivalence and ambiguity: his function, vast and vague, serves to obscure the purpose behind some of his individual actions. Simultaneously, Snorri's description of Óðinn's role contains an important qualification for attempting to understand Óðinn's many portrayals: though he occupies the position of the All-Father, it is important to remember that he is not, in empirical fact, the father of everything.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Page (1990) 35.

¹⁶⁵ Simek (1993) 240.

¹⁶⁶ Orchard (1997) 122 and Lindow (2001) 250.

¹⁶⁷ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 21.

¹⁶⁸ It is important to consider the extent to which Snorri is being influenced by his Christian understanding of Yahweh in his characterisation of Óðinn. Vésteinn Ólason (2013) 35-41 explores this idea, and furthermore

Snorri's configuration of Óðinn indicates an essential quality of the god that this thesis will revisit several times in discussing his engagement with female concepts of power: Óðinn's tendency is to emulate the powers and abilities that are characteristically associated with empowered women, rather than to naturally embody them.

It has already been demonstrated that there is an underlying anxiety about the honour, or otherwise, of Þórr's associations with females; Óðinn, however, is more consciously a creature of moral ambivalence, and this is particularly evident in his dealings with female figures, as will now be discussed. Óðinn's most obvious and developed relationship with a female figure is his marriage to the goddess Frigg. In terms of her literary portrayal, she is a more developed and active character than the ill-defined and emblematic Sif: Frigg does not easily conform to a 'type', and thus the portrayal of her and her relationship to Óðinn will be dealt with later in a separate chapter (2.2.2.). What is of interest here, however, is Óðinn's proclivity for extramarital sex: his wife 'is often deserted in a string of sexual peccadilloes with a variety of female creatures.'¹⁶⁹ If Þórr's typical response to empowered independent females is to fight them, to the exclusion of almost any other interaction, then Óðinn's typical response is to bed them.

As in the case of Þórr, it is *Hárbarðsljóð* that provides the best demonstration of the chief dynamic of Óðinn's interactions with women. Óðinn deliberately offers up his numerous sexual liaisons as a juxtaposition to Þórr's homicidal approach to giantesses, a typical example of which would be this: *hvilda ek hía þeim systrom siau/ ok hafða ek geð þeira allt ok gaman* 'I slept with those seven sisters, and I had from them all their desire and pleasure.'¹⁷⁰ The identity of these seven sisters is unclear, and indeed to some extent it is necessary that it be so: as Þórr's contests with giantesses are a non-specific factor used to

argues for the possibility of seeing the All-Father as a figures distinct from both Yahweh and Óðinn in original pagan thought.

¹⁶⁹ Orchard (1997) 123.

¹⁷⁰ 'Hárbarðsljóð' 18.

highlight a defining character trait, so too are Óðinn's various sexual conquests used mainly to illustrate a fundamental aspect of the god.

Though the juxtaposition of Þórr's and Óðinn's differing interactions with empowered alien female figures seems on a surface level designed to humiliate the younger god through the ludicrousness of the comparison, nevertheless *Hárbarðsljóð* is simultaneously implying a parity between the two sets of actions.¹⁷¹ Both gods are, in a sense, humiliated by their actions, though Óðinn perhaps does not realise it: if Þórr's *modus operandi* revolves, as argued above, around a stratagem of denying female sexuality in the women he encounters in an attempt to redefine his opponents, then Óðinn's process is a matter of reducing the females he interacts with to little more than vessels for female sexuality, which is in itself a form of redefinition. His dismissiveness of Þórr's martial function is also a consideration: even if he is doing it for comic reasons, it nevertheless represents a slight against the function of the warrior class, something which would perhaps reflect badly on him. Though Óðinn is mocking Þórr, nevertheless in so doing he reveals an aspect of himself that a contemporary audience might have found distasteful: by fixating on sex, he abandons his masculine prerogative of protecting and securing his lands, something which Þórr accomplishes by the actions for which he is being mocked. Of the two gods, Óðinn is the only figure who could in this instance be reproached for being selfish.

The parity between the actions of the two gods is furthermore used to underscore the similarity of the mechanics that underlie them. There is an exploitative element to both deities' approaches to alien females that is highlighted through their juxtaposition: if Óðinn's sexual adventures are a suitable comparison to Þórr's martial ones, as the structure of the poem suggests they are, then it logically follows that there must be enough of a

¹⁷¹ Orchard (1997) 123-4 suggests the sense of competition between the two gods may also derive from a time when their real-world cults might have been in opposition.

similarity between them for that comparison to be meaningful. Both revolve around the control, denial and/or alteration of some kind of prominent aspect of being female, and the poem shows us that both approaches are equally aggressive. Perhaps most notable in this regard is Óðinn's use of craftiness against women, which often conveys a suggestion of sorcery: *Miklar manvélar ek hafða við myrkriðor/ þá er ek vélta þær frá verom* 'Great love tricks I have used against night-riders [witches], when I tricked them from their husbands.'¹⁷² Óðinn's intention presumably is to humiliate his son through the juxtaposition of their actions: one man using women 'properly' as sexual partners, the other man using them 'improperly' as adversaries. The juxtaposition, however, reflects just as much on Óðinn himself, and how his actions might have been understood by a contemporary audience. Whether or not Óðinn's actions described here are a form of magical assault, or merely the product of his persuasive cunning, Óðinn's behaviour is being placed in the same category as Þórr's behaviour: both gods are concerned with the suppression of independent female power, the transformation of the female character into something more suitable for their own male purposes, and the subsuming of female sexuality (by one means or another) under the auspices of male will.

If there is a suggestion in *Hárbarðsljóð* that Óðinn's seduction of the giantesses involves a magical form of mind control, it feeds into a well established and prominent tradition of such magic in medieval literature.¹⁷³ Whether it is Óðinn's mind-controlling magic, or else some other cunning trick, that he employs, its effect is to remove a woman's ability to govern the right of sexual access to her own body, and in so doing furthermore disown the *verar*, the men or husbands, to whom access was presumably freely given. If, as argued in the previous section (1.2.3.), Þórr's rapid departure at the end of this poem represents a desire to assume immediate and proximate control of Sif's sexual bounty, it

¹⁷² 'Hárbarðsljóð' 20.

¹⁷³ Tolley (2009) 114.

serves to underscore the fact that Óðinn has already performed a similar action of taking control. This dynamic potentially adds a new meaning to our understanding of the poem as a whole: it is not necessarily just a poem that juxtaposes the two gods' approaches to women with the intent of highlighting their differences, but instead draws a distinction between the two god's methods of achieving the same effect, which is the control of female sexuality and the annihilation of female independent will. If this is the case, then Óðinn is clearly the more adept manoeuvrer: unlike Þórr's quasi-comical necessity to physically rush off to effect his control over his wife, Óðinn's control is apparently more effective. He, markedly, does not need to hurry away: indeed, the entire poem depicts him as a languid and static figure, in comparison to the energetic and mobile Þórr. It is an aspect of him that symbolically suggests his control over the situation, and by extension his control over the subject of their argument.

A major source for information about Óðinn's thought processes is *Hávamál*, a poem that purports to be the wisdom of the god himself.¹⁷⁴ The poem must be treated with a degree of caution: it has traditionally, although not universally, been viewed not as a piece composed as a coherent whole, but rather as several poems put together, and that has subsequently been associated in its entirety with the figure of Óðinn.¹⁷⁵ It does nevertheless reflect a variety of patriarchal concerns, and offers a consistent view on how a powerful man might approach powerful and sexualised female figures; it comes from a viewpoint that, were it not attributed to the literary Óðinn, he would certainly be sympathetic to. All this being duly noted, the following argument will take the medieval view implied by the poem's title, 'The Speech of the High One', and consider the speaker to be Óðinn throughout.

¹⁷⁴ For a full discussion of the character of Óðinn in the poem, and the ways in which he compares with other portrayals of Óðinn, see Dronke (2011) 36-49. As an example of a counter-view, see Grønvik (1999), which argues that the narrator is a priest of Óðinn.

¹⁷⁵ For a discussion of the ways in which the poem can be broken down into multiple parts, see McKinnell (2007a). For a discussion of potential sources for *Hávamál*, see Larrington (1990-3) 141-57.

The magical aspects of Óðinn's manipulations of women hinted at in *Hárbarðsljóð* are overtly rendered in *Hávamál*:

Þat kann ek it sextánda: ef ek vil ins svinna mans
hafa geð allt ok gaman,
hugi ek hverfi hvítarmri kono
ok sný ek hennar ǫllom sefa.

[I know the sixteenth: if I want to have all the wise maid's desire and pleasure, I turn the mind of the white-armed woman and I twist all her mind.]¹⁷⁶

The seventeenth charm, which immediately follows this, induces a similar effect, and specifically forces the woman to remain with Óðinn.¹⁷⁷ The most important aspect of this kind of magic is that it overtly removes a woman's control over her sexuality: the emphasis, furthermore, is clearly not on the temporary acquisition of sexual favours, but on the sustained control of sexual access for the male. Óðinn, in essence, is not attempting to destroy or deny the sexual nature of the women he encounters, as Þórr does with the daughters of Geirröðr and the she-wolves of *Hárbarðsljóð*, but rather he is appropriating it by removing the woman's independent control; it is an act that has overtones of rape. Indeed, this particular magic, as described in *Hávamál*, has a penetrative quality to it: the verbs *hverfa* and *snúa* both suggest the act of twisting, rotating, and turning in a visceral and physical sense.¹⁷⁸ There is a tangibility to them: they possess a sense of physical coercion, even if it is neither as overt nor as obvious as Þórr's attempts at controlling female sexuality.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ 'Hávamál' 161.

¹⁷⁷ 'Hávamál' 162.

¹⁷⁸ Zoëga (2004) 219 & 394.

¹⁷⁹ Price (2002) 220 has argued that spiritual possession is tantamount to bodily penetration; though what is happening here is not the same thing, I think it is possible to draw a parallel between the two forms of supernatural manifestation.

Hávamál also demonstrates other aspects of Óðinn's sexual politics. There are three instances in the poem when Óðinn reveals his conception of the relationship between women and magic. One of these is the example given above, demonstrating the extent to which magic can be employed in the requisitioning and containment of female sexual capital. Another is the tenth charm that Óðinn claims to know:

Þat kann ek it tíunda: ef ek sé túnriðor

leika lopti á,

ek svá vinnk, at þær villar fara

sinna heim hama

sinna heim huga.

[I know the tenth: if I see witches sport in the air, I can work it so that they go

astray from their real shapes, their own minds.]¹⁸⁰

Though there is no sexual element to this charm, it nevertheless reflects to some degree the intention of the sixteenth and seventeenth charms. It is an aggressive magical assault that is specifically aimed at female targets. There is, furthermore, the same hint of invasiveness to this magic as to the other charms: it invades the bodily quality of the women, altering their form by male will. Though the morality of the situation is rendered unclear given that witches are often, but not universally, portrayed as 'the prototypical evil women of [the mythological] world', it is certain that Óðinn is no moral paragon.¹⁸¹ The verb *leika*, furthermore, with its primary suggestion of the act of playing, suggests that not only are the witches not engaging Óðinn in a fight, but that they are unaware of his presence.¹⁸² He is, by implication, attacking from a position of concealment. The nature of the magic also reflects the earlier suggestion that a key component of Óðinn's interactions with empowered female figures involves making a separation between their passive power and

¹⁸⁰ 'Hávamál' 155.

¹⁸¹ Mitchell (2011) 180.

¹⁸² Zoëga (2004) 266.

their individual self-governance: in this case, Óðinn negates the supernatural power of the females he encounters by divorcing the elements that comprise them, by removing control over the form and function of the body from the mind. Though there seems to be no desire to steal or appropriate the power of the witches here, it nevertheless represents the imposition of male will upon female power which creates a redefinition of that female; it is necessary and desirable for Óðinn to violate these figures mentally, to impose his will into the makeup of their bodies as a means of negating what power they might have.

The third and final quotation from *Hávamál* that concerns the relationship between women and magic occurs earlier in the poem (as we have it) than the other two cited examples, and is as follows:

Ráðomk þér, Loddfáfnir, at þú ráð nemir -
 nióta mundo, ef þú nemr,
 þér muno góð, ef þú getr -:
 fiqlkunnigri kono skalattu í faðmi sofa,
 svá at hon lyki þik liðom.

Hón svá gørir, at þú gáir eigi
 þings né þjóðans máls;
 mat þú villat né mannzkis gaman,
 ferr þú sorgafullr at sofa.

[I advise you, Loddfáfnir, that you take advice – it will help if you take it, it will do you good if you get it: you must not sleep in the embrace of a woman skilled in magic, so that she encloses your limbs. She will bring it about that you care not for

meetings, nor the affairs of rulers; you will not want food nor anyone's good company, you will go to sleep sorrowful.]"¹⁸³

Óðinn's description of the consequences of sexual dalliances with supernaturally empowered females makes for an interesting juxtaposition with the charms that he himself will later go on to recite in the poem. They are, materially, much the same in terms of intent and effect: unlimited sexual access to the body of the victim is guaranteed, and free will and mental control are usurped from the victim and subordinated under the influence of the magic practitioner. Both the unwillingness and the powerlessness of the victim are emphasised through the overt description of their sorrow, which reflects the aggressive qualities of Óðinn's later charms against women. This betrays the dual standard of Óðinn's patriarchal worldview: when Óðinn's male interlocutor is cast in the role of potential victim these magical practices are treated as a thing to be cautioned against and avoided at all costs, but when he is in the position of being the magic-user these spells are presented as useful tools in the pursuit of sexual gratification. In one instance the supernaturally empowered woman is a 'physical and psychological trap' whose purpose is the sexual ensnarement and mental slavery of a socially successful male, in the other instance a wiser man is passing on the tricks-of-the-trade, as it were, to the less experienced lover in a self-congratulatory tone.¹⁸⁴ Whereas Þórr's approach to controlling or altering female natures responds to his unique talent for physical violence, Óðinn's methods conversely match those of his potential victims. Óðinn's implicit assertion of differing moral values to the same action, depending on whether it is the male or the female who is the active party, ultimately reveals more about Óðinn's character than it does about the magical acts themselves.

¹⁸³ 'Hávamál' 113-4.

¹⁸⁴ Dronke (2011) 45.

Hávamál also contains other, non-magical instances of Óðinn's sexual encounters with women. One of these is a reference to his relationship with the giantess Gunnlöð.¹⁸⁵ She is an integral part of the story concerning the creation of the mead of poetry, and also features in Snorri's account of the myth.¹⁸⁶ The myth of the seduction of Gunnlöð has been subject to numerous interpretations.¹⁸⁷ One possible interpretation is that Gunnlöð serves as an example of a literary topos wherein the hero must seduce a beautiful maiden, who is often a giantess, in order to achieve some goal that would otherwise be impossible without her help or agreement.¹⁸⁸ It is possible, therefore, to read Óðinn's seduction of Gunnlöð in a purely utilitarian light: his conquest of her is nothing more than a necessary step in the acquisition of a divine power that is held in a form of stasis by the giants, and that when released into the world becomes a positive force for man and god alike. Although *Hávamál* 110 describes Gunnlöð grieving because of her abandonment by Óðinn, nevertheless one can read this as a necessary sacrifice for the greater good.¹⁸⁹ Óðinn's willingness to deceive the giantess in a shameful way for a noble goal in fact mirrors Þórr's actions in *Prymskviða* to some extent, although without the clear comic intent: it is a quasi-heroic quality whereby a small dishonour is accommodated to allow a greater victory to be accomplished.

As with Þórr, Óðinn's desire to exert control over female sexuality is related to the need to procreate. Whilst the sons of Óðinn are more diverse and developed than Þórr's offspring (i.e. they are not simply hypostases of their father), they are nevertheless produced specifically by their father's will and often for a certain purpose. The sexual act is again subsumed into patriarchal authority: it becomes as much a political as a

¹⁸⁵ 'Hávamál' 104-10.

¹⁸⁶ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 3-5.

¹⁸⁷ Frank (2007) 179-80 views the seduction as form of *hieros gamos* by which Óðinn lays claim to territory, and which is paralleled in numerous skaldic poems; Schjødt (2008) 153-6 views it as a legitimate marriage; McKinnell (2005) 166-7 views the myth as a means of legitimising Gunnlöð as the ancestress of royal lines.

¹⁸⁸ See Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013b) 73-6 for an overview of this topos.

¹⁸⁹ Clunies Ross (1994a) 130 argues that Gunnlöð's grief is a confirmation of Óðinn's having made a false promise of marriage to her. This argument is extended and further supported by Schjødt (2008) 153-6.

procreative act. The most prominent example of this is the fathering of Váli (or Bous), which is recorded in several sources, most notably the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus (which will be discussed in more detail in 1.3.3.).¹⁹⁰ The oldest extant reference to the myth is probably that recorded in a stanza of skaldic poetry attributed to the tenth-century Kormákr Ögmundarson:

Eykr með ennidúki
jarðhljótr díafjarðar
breyti hún sá er beinan
bindr. Seið Yggr til Rindar.

[The land-getter (= ruler), who binds the mast-top straight, honours the provider of the fjord of the gods (fjord of the gods = poetry; provider of poetry = Kormákr or possibly Óðinn) with a headband. Yggr (Óðinn) won Rindr by magic.]¹⁹¹

Though this stanza contains only a passing reference to Óðinn's sexual encounter with Rindr, it is nevertheless important in understanding the nature and context of the myth. If this stanza is indeed genuinely tenth-century, and the scholarly consensus is that it is, then it demonstrates that the myth significantly predates Saxo's rendering of it.¹⁹² That the myth alluded to is one deeply entrenched in the Old Norse mindset is suggested by the brevity of the reference in Kormákr's verse: it presumes that the audience would be sufficiently aware of the details and context of the myth in order to understand the point that the poet is making. Through the use of the verb *seiða* 'to enchant', furthermore, the verse seems to confirm that the connection between Óðinn and sexual magic significantly predates *Hávamál* in its present form.¹⁹³ In all versions of the myth Rindr is not a willing sexual partner, but rather one whom Óðinn must bend to his will through underhand means, either

¹⁹⁰ For a summary of all of Váli's appearances, see Simek (1993) 348.

¹⁹¹ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 85.

¹⁹² McKinnell (2005) 157.

¹⁹³ Zoëga (2004) 353, for the meaning of *seiða*.

by magic or disguise. His reason for doing so is that he must engender a son to avenge the killing of Baldr; procreation thus becomes a highly political act. The mother's will is nowhere represented in the conception of the child, nor indeed in the child's character. Óðinn has hijacked female procreative potential in order to fashion a useful ally who can perform an action that he himself cannot.

Whilst it is possible to see some of Óðinn's extramarital affairs, such as with Gunnlöð and Rindr, as fulfilling a utilitarian function by way of the necessity of accomplishing a specific goal, other sexual encounters do not have a clear motive. Mention has already been made of Óðinn's catalogue of sexual conquests in *Hárbarðsljóð*, in which it is difficult to divine a motive other than sexual gratification. Even in *Hávamál*, the depiction of the seduction of Gunnlöð is in some sense mirrored by Óðinn's abortive attempt to seduce Billingr's daughter, where lust appears to be the sole motivating factor.¹⁹⁴ In these sexual encounters, physical enjoyment rather than future gain is clearly Óðinn's intent.

Óðinn's frequent dalliances with giantesses thus seem to run contrary to his advice cautioning against sleeping with supernatural women. The distinction between the different categories of supernaturally empowered female figures in eddic texts is difficult to assess, hence there is a sense that Óðinn is ignoring his own wisdom.¹⁹⁵ Billingr's daughter, and to a lesser extent Rindr, are both women of an indeterminate nature, and both are portrayed as resourceful, intelligent and practical. If not actually magically empowered, they are at least formidable in their own way. When Óðinn pursues them for sex, they resist him: Rindr is ultimately unsuccessful, but Billingr's daughter not only fends off the god, but takes the opportunity to play an insulting practical joke on him. What this suggests is that not only is Óðinn willing to copulate with females outside his society's domestic circle, but also that

¹⁹⁴ 'Hávamál' 96-102.

¹⁹⁵ Tally Lionarons (2005) 274-5.

he is willing to pursue women who come close to, or even surpass, his own level of resourcefulness and guile. Óðinn's caution against having sex with supernaturally empowered women can thus be teased apart to reveal the following underlying message: it is not necessarily dangerous for a man to have sex with supernatural women, but rather it is dangerous for him to have sex with supernatural women when he is not in absolute control of the situation.

This tenet appears to be at the heart of Óðinn's philosophy concerning female power. Female sexual potential is necessary for both pleasure and profit, but can only be approached safely if it is divorced from female agency, and taken under an absolute male control. In a sense this explains Óðinn's success in terms of his sexual conquests: he does not, in essence, involve himself emotionally in the act in any meaningful way. Rather than engaging with these female figures on their own terms, as Þórr does, Óðinn separates the element that he wants from the female whole, and takes it under his own auspices. Óðinn redefines the females he encounters, rendering them into objects that function as adjuncts to his own sexual needs. In reality, it reduces the sexual act to a solitary pastime, the female body becoming little more than a prop to the proceedings, and actual female agency is put aside. This in part explains Óðinn's characteristic lack of vulnerability relative to his partners in sexual situations, though as a counter-example one can see that he was fortunate in receiving no worse harm than an insult from Billingr's daughter;¹⁹⁶ unlike Þórr, he can disable the aggressive female will remotely through magic, without the need to engage in physical conflict first. This approach to sex also reveals Óðinn's cynicism: encounters with sexually desirable women usually rapidly progress to a point where the female is transformed into a plaything for the god to use at will. Despite their frequency and variety, Óðinn's sexual encounters do not serve to inform his character in the same

¹⁹⁶ This is probably because the story of Billingr's daughter is likely to be comic in tone; see Dronke (2011) 41-3 for a discussion of its potential humour, and for parallels in other literature.

way that a great deal of Þórr's essential nature is revealed through his interactions with empowered women. Óðinn almost never allows himself to be vulnerable in any way when dealing with women, but this in turn prevents those women and their actions and nature from reflecting meaningfully upon his character.

1.3.3. Power, Seiðr and the Act of Cross-dressing

In the analysis of the cross-dressing episode of *Prymskviða* (1.2.4.) it was suggested that Þórr was to some extent engaging with and obtaining the use of a nebulous aspect of female power as a necessary humiliation for the completion of a vital objective; the female disguise, and the facility it brought the god, was both assumed and disposed of at will without any fundamental alteration to the god's essential nature. With Óðinn, however, his personal acquisition of feminised concepts of power is characteristically more complicated. Lindow, however, has drawn a parity between Þórr and Óðinn's cross-dressing episodes, demonstrating that in both cases the action is carried out under a similar sense of eschatological duress.¹⁹⁷ Óðinn's cross-dressing, furthermore, is linked to the concept of *seiðr*, a power with which he is more strongly associated than any other male figure in Norse literature; indeed, Óðinn has been described as 'l'archetype... du magicien dans le Nord'.¹⁹⁸ Óðinn's use of *seiðr*, and the related act of cross-dressing, will be the focus of this section.

As has been made clear above, the three-way relationship between Óðinn, sorcery and female power is a complicated one. The web of interconnected themes is further complicated by Óðinn's engagement with *seiðr*, an art with strong female associations. For many years there has been a large amount of scholarly inquiry into the particulars of *seiðr*, both in its literary portrayal and in terms of its status in the real world of medieval

¹⁹⁷ Lindow (2002) 168-9.

¹⁹⁸ Boyer (1986) 135.

Scandinavia.¹⁹⁹ The scholarly consensus, however, is that *seiðr* acts as an umbrella term to represent some of the most potent forms of supernatural power in the Old Norse mythological context, and that the use of it by men is problematised due to the fact that it carries an abstract but nevertheless integral aspect of femininity about it.²⁰⁰ Clunies Ross has argued that the limitation of *seiðr* to women reduces its social threat by marginalising it within a ritual system.²⁰¹ In spite of this, or possibly in consequence of it, *seiðr* is often presented as a dangerous and socially destructive force; one could argue, in fact, that the limitation of *seiðr* to women within the social construct actually increases its sense of threat, as without understanding or experience of magic men essentially have no protection against it. The engagement of a sovereign figure, Óðinn, with *seiðr* is consequently unusual, and to some extent runs contrary to the social order he perpetuates; this, as will be demonstrated, leads to a number of tensions.

Though the eddic poetry discussed above (in 1.3.2.) demonstrates several aspects of Óðinn's engagement with sorcery, the most detailed description of his use of *seiðr* is found in *Ynglinga saga*, where Snorri devotes a substantial amount of discourse to listing the various magical abilities that Óðinn is capable of performing.²⁰² Of *seiðr* Snorri reports:

Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr mátt fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita orlof manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera monnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá monnum vit eða afl ok gefa qðrum. En þessi fjölkyngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmonnum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt.

¹⁹⁹ An exhaustive survey of the important investigation and analyses of *seiðr* from the nineteenth century to the present day can be found in Mitchell (2011) 4-15. Mitchell's work is in itself an important contemporary study of magic in the Norse imagination, as are Tolley (2009) and Price (2002).

²⁰⁰ Price (2002) 64-8.

²⁰¹ Clunies Ross (1994a) 207-8.

²⁰² Price (2002) 70-1 asserts that the amount of detail in Snorri's description suggests that it is based upon a now lost stanza of *Ynglingatal*. If true, then it demonstrates that concerns over the nature and use of *seiðr* substantially predate the writing of the saga and is not merely Snorri's thirteenth-century invention.

[Óðinn knew that art, which is accompanied by most power, and he himself practised, which is called *seiðr*. And by it he was able to know the fates of men and future things, and also to cause death to men or bad luck or illness, and likewise to take from some men wit and strength and give them to others. But such great *ergi* accompanies this sorcery, when it is practiced, that men did not think it without shame to have dealings with it, and that art was taught to the goddesses.]²⁰³

The dual nature of *seiðr* is neatly encapsulated by Snorri in this brief description. He explicitly states that it is considered the most powerful form of magic, and indeed his examples agree with this. In broad terms, *seiðr* affords its user two complementary functions: the ability to foresee the future, and the power to alter the present radically. Snorri, however, makes it clear that there is a price to pay for using this *ffjolkyngi* ‘sorcery’: it carries with it a high degree of *ergi*, the deeply shameful and emasculating quality which was discussed in the section concerning Þórr (1.2.4.). As with the situation in *Þrymskviða*, Snorri suggest that there is a tension here between the necessity or desirability of the prize and the gravity of the shame which must be incurred for its achievement.²⁰⁴ Though Snorri casually redirects the use of *seiðr* into female hands, there is nevertheless no indication that Óðinn has surrendered the powers he has obtained. The fact that mention is made of further powers attributed to Óðinn, and of the celebrity they bring him, suggests that he has not ceased to practise *seiðr*. It suggests that Óðinn has not been content to leave the matter of *seiðr* in the hands of the goddesses, where its feminine connotations would be naturally more comfortable. If *Hávamál* demonstrates Óðinn’s distrust of empowered women and betrays his cynicism in dealing with the opposite sex, here he is willing to shoulder the

²⁰³ *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 19.

²⁰⁴ Clunies Ross (1994a) 209 asserts that whilst Snorri’s description of *seiðr* cannot be taken as historical fact, nevertheless it represents his rationalisation of strongly established social and religious customs. Winterbourne (2004) 30 also suggests that the characteristics of ritual practices probably precede the literary characterisation of the gods.

burden of shame generated by *seiðr* in order that he may have direct access to it; it would seem to be not enough that the women under his rulership could provide him with indirect access to this power.

The uncomfortable question hanging over the nature of Óðinn's interaction with *seiðr* is further exacerbated by his use of cross-dressing. Whereas Þórr's cross-dressing adventure is a single self-contained episode, Óðinn's use of the practice is more oblique: it is referenced in several sources, and clearly has importance in the construction of Óðinn's character, but the particulars of it are nevertheless understated. A prominent example is to be found in *Lokasenna*:

‘En þik síða kóðo Sámseyo í,
ok draptu á vétt sem vǫlor;
vitka líki fórtu verþióð yfir,
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.’

[‘But they say you practiced *seiðr* on Sámsey, and you beat upon a magic drum as *völur* do; in a warlock's shape you travelled over the world of men and I thought that the nature of an unmanly man.’]²⁰⁵

This stanza is delivered by Loki, and represents his final direct insult to Óðinn. The context of this insult within the poem is important for understanding the type of allegation that Loki is making. His first insult to Óðinn accuses the god of granting victory to the weaker or more cowardly side in battle.²⁰⁶ The purpose of this is to subvert Óðinn's nature as a god of war.²⁰⁷ Óðinn's response acknowledges, although unwillingly, the truth of this, and counters with an accusation regarding Loki's assumption of a female form and his bearing of children; it is an accusation of *argr* behaviour.²⁰⁸ Loki's response, therefore, is

²⁰⁵ ‘Lokasenna’ 24.

²⁰⁶ ‘Lokasenna’ 22.

²⁰⁷ Frakes (2002) 166

²⁰⁸ ‘Lokasenna’ 23.

to return the insult back on Óðinn, which invites a comparison between their mutual behaviours; indeed, Loki repeats the final line of Óðinn's stanza, with its overt accusation of *argr* behaviour, to emphasise the comparison: *ek hugða ek þat args aðal* 'and I thought that the nature of an unmanly man'. In terms of a retaliation, Loki is implying that Óðinn's flouting of the gender boundary is at least equal to or worse than his own: they are both 'part-time transsexuals'.²⁰⁹ Whether this is in fact an example of cross-dressing is linguistically unclear, *vitka líki* 'in a warlock's shape' in itself suggesting the male role, though it has generally been assumed to denote the action of cross-dressing.²¹⁰ It has been suggested that magical practices in medieval and pre-medieval Scandinavia would have involved some blurring of the gender of the practitioner, with archaeological evidence suggesting that a prominent method of achieving this would be for the male sorcerer to adopt female clothing.²¹¹ This is supported by the reference to the witch's drum, an associated artefact used in shamanic rituals.²¹² In consequence, it is highly possible that by accusing Óðinn of travelling 'in a warlock's shape', Loki is in fact accusing him of appearing as a man dressed as a woman. It is also clear that whatever action it is that Óðinn has allegedly committed, it carries with it a high cost in shame.

Another interesting aspect of this exchange between the two gods is that the poem does not allow Óðinn the opportunity to respond to this accusation; it is his wife, Frigg, who answers Loki.²¹³ If Óðinn's silence can on one level be read as a tacit acknowledgement of the truth of Loki's allegation, then the particulars of Frigg's carefully worded response further emphasise it: she neither confirms nor denies what Loki has said, but instead implores him to keep silent about shameful things. Her tactic is thus manifestly one of concealment, which in itself is an acknowledgement of the truthfulness of what she

²⁰⁹ Frakes (2002) 167.

²¹⁰ Larrington (1999) 275, n. 89.

²¹¹ Price (2002) 271 and 301-3.

²¹² Tolley (2009) 521-5 and DuBois (1999) 130-1.

²¹³ 'Lokasenna' 25.

would like to conceal. The overall feeling of the exchange is that a satisfying conclusion has not been reached, and that the forces of social unease, represented by the figure of Loki, have achieved some kind of victory. The closest figures divine society has to a king and a queen are clearly discomfited by these accusations, nor is there any sense of closure on the issue: it is clear that Óðinn's undertakings are sufficiently questionable to warrant secrecy. Through the use of *seiðr*, we see Óðinn interacting with a potent feminised form of power, but little justification for his actions is offered here.

The most detailed description of Óðinn engaging in cross-dressing occurs in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, and comprises the only full-length treatment of the Rindr episode mentioned in the previous section.²¹⁴ The blurred distinction between the use of sorcery and the act of cross-dressing is neatly demonstrated by the contrasting ways in which Kormákr Ögmundarson (whose stanza was discussed in 1.3.2.) and Saxo Grammaticus treat Óðinn's methods of enacting the rape of Rindr; whilst Kormákr lays emphasis on the use of *seiðr* in his brief reference to the rape, Saxo's much longer account combines the use of sorcery and cross-dressing. When compared with the cross-dressing episode of *Þrymskviða*, it can be seen that both stories posit a similar scenario: a great social wrong has occurred and divine society has been unbalanced as a result, either through the theft of Þórr's hammer or the killing of Baldr. Both Þórr and Óðinn are reliably informed of a method through which the situation may be remedied, and they alone must assume sole responsibility for that remedy. Both gods, ultimately, are required to assume a female disguise in order to complete their objectives.

There is, however, a marked difference in terms of the manner in which each story is related. *Þrymskviða*, with its broad comic strokes, attempts to portray its central issues and themes in a light-hearted manner, although I have argued that it is not entirely

²¹⁴ Saxo Grammaticus (1931) 70-3. Though it is the only full extant source for the myth, Rooth (1961) 98 has suggested that it is probably a composite of several different myths.

successful in that respect (1.2.4.). Þórr's own highlighting of the shameful of his cross-dressing has the effect of diminishing its social impact: by raising *ergi* as a central issue even before he has put on his bridal clothing, Þórr in a sense pre-empt the reactions of both the figures around him and the readers of the poem. Þórr's understanding of his own predicament emphasises the comedy of the situation, and makes his eventual re-assumption of a male appearance a celebratory gesture. If there is comedy in Saxo's account of Óðinn's cross-dressing account, it is of a much darker and grittier kind; there is a sense that Saxo takes a grim pleasure in bringing the king of the false gods down to the lowest level, as fits with his ideological purpose of deprecating 'anything of Germanic origin'.²¹⁵ This is particularly evident in the repeated physical assaults that Rindr commits upon Óðinn on each occasion he attempts to woo her: the image of a god strongly associated with military endeavours being beaten up by a young girl is as damaging to his dignity as his later cross-dressing is, and Saxo relishes the details: *Quam cum discessurus osculo petere vellet, ita ab ea propulsus est, ut mentum terræ nutabundus impingeret* 'On one occasion, before departing, he wanted to take a kiss from her, but she gave him such a push that he tottered and banged his chin on the floor.'²¹⁶ Rindr's common sense and awareness of Óðinn's character, furthermore, is held up as admirable by the overtly partisan narration; whilst Þórr is clearly the hero of *Þrymskviða*, the figure with whom the audience should most identify, it is clear that in Saxo's account Óðinn plays the dual role of fool and villain, and that Rindr has the measure of him: *Non dubitavit enim pervicacis animi puella, quin subdolos senex libidinis adytum ficta liberalite captaret* 'For the stubborn girl was certain that the sly old man was seeking for an opportunity to work his lust by feigning generosity.'²¹⁷ There can be little doubt concerning where Saxo's sympathies lie, nor can the moralising qualities be ignored: Óðinn is portrayed unequivocally as a villainous and

²¹⁵ McKinnell (2005) 43.

²¹⁶ Saxo Grammaticus (1931) 71.

²¹⁷ Saxo Grammaticus (1931) 70.

repulsive lecher. Óðinn eventually tires of the physical abuse he receives and enchants Rindr in such a way that she falls into a fit, a form of retribution that Saxo finds surprisingly justified: *receptam toties iniuriam modesto ultionis genere insecutus* ‘a moderate revenge for the continual insults he had received.’²¹⁸ There is a sense, however, that this strange comment fits with Saxo’s agenda: it is a form of the mock-heroic. Óðinn, having been on several occasions beaten by this young girl, now takes vengeance upon her: a similarly shameful thing in terms of Old Norse gender relations.²¹⁹ Saxo focuses on Óðinn’s indefatigability, a quality which serves Þórr well in his adventures, but here must serve as parodic in view of the fact that the god’s enemy is a young woman.

The cross-dressing element of this myth, appearing as it does at the terminus of the story, thus acts as a summation of everything that has gone before. Óðinn, even before putting on female clothing, has already been emasculated by his inability to overcome Rindr. The adoption of female clothing can in some sense be read as a signifier of Óðinn’s emasculated state: not the cause of his dishonour, but a symptom of it. Another reading of this situation, however, is that it serves to legitimise the concept of female power in the story: though there is an element of the comic in Óðinn’s inability to overcome Rindr, by portraying their relationship in this way the story does nevertheless establish independent female power as a potent force. Óðinn’s recourse to both magic and cross-dressing in some sense acknowledges the strength of female resistance: in spite of his earlier humiliating failures to win Rindr’s affection through expensive gifts and displays of masculinity, he quickly succeeds in his objective once he commits to the *argr* behaviour of *seiðr* and cross-dressing. Though Saxo makes no direct link between using magic and the adoption of a female form, each action clearly informs the other. Óðinn’s magical act possesses a disturbingly penetrative quality as it overthrows Rindr’s mind and removes her own

²¹⁸ Saxo Grammaticus (1931) 71.

²¹⁹ Miller (1990) 207-8.

agency from the control of her body (recalling the intent of Óðinn's charms in *Hávamál*, discussed in 1.3.2.); Óðinn's symbolic and supernatural seizure of Rindr's sexual functions by magic is then immediately contrasted with the real and physical rape that it allows Óðinn to commit. Óðinn's success is based on the redefinition of both his and Rindr's characters: the resisting woman is changed into a helpless and insensible woman by his magic, and he himself is changed by his own adoption of a female power and form.

The climax of Saxo's account shares a further parallel with that of Þórr's adventure in *Prymskviða*, insofar as the dénouement of both stories involves the stripping away of the female form to reveal the masculinity of the figure underneath it. In the case of Þórr, the abandonment of the female role occurs at the moment the god retrieves his hammer, the emblem of his masculinity, and he instantly reverts to his typical masculine activities in broadly celebratory tones. The climax of the Rindr episode is, however, entirely different in character: Óðinn's opponent is not an assembly of warrior giants, but a young woman who is bewitched and bound to her bed. The attack, furthermore, is not simply a physical assault, but a sexual one: Rindr is subjected to rape, and there can be no question of her acquiescence to the act as Saxo describes it. Indeed, Saxo focuses his efforts on providing a graphic account of the act:

Medicus namque, Veneris occasione sumpta, mutato curationis officio, prius ad exercendæ libidinis quam pellendæ febris negotium procurrit, adversa puellæ valetudine usus, cuius inimicam sibi incolumitatem expertus fuerat.

[The physician stopped attending to her and seized the chance of love, and abandoning his task of healing, sped to the work, not of expelling the fever, but of working his lust, making use of the sickness of the princess, whom in sound health he had found adverse to him.]²²⁰

²²⁰ Saxo Grammaticus (1931) 72.

The overall effect is one that portrays Óðinn as grotesque and cowardly, as opposed to the ostensibly celebratory nature of Þórr's actions.

It is also possible to read a parallel between the two texts' use of symbols of masculinity. The phallic object of the hammer is placed in Þórr's lap, and at that moment his power is restored. It is important, however, to remember that as the hammer is placed in its 'correct' position at Þórr's groin, he is dressed as a woman: symbolically, the image is one of a female possessing male genitalia. If, as has been suggested, empowerment can be derived from a blurring of the gender boundary, then it is perhaps no surprise that this amalgamation of gendered images immediately precedes Þórr's victory over the assembled giants. Óðinn too presents a confused image of the male and female body: though disguised as a woman, the rape draws attention to the male genitalia which must perforce exist beneath his clothing in order for him to commit the act. No mention is made of Óðinn removing his disguise in order to perform the act, and there is no reason to imagine that he should remove it, and thus consequently the act of fathering a son, a man's most basic physical and social role, is enacted by one who has the appearance of a woman. As with Þórr, this is an empowering act: as a result of the rape a child is conceived who can effect vengeance where Óðinn cannot. Though this is not a clear manifestation of *seiðr*, this moment at which the gender lines are blurred, as with Þórr's case, represents the exact point at which the male in female clothing becomes empowered, in which the gender definition of his own character is most uncertain. Whilst *Þrymskviða* ends with no reference to the long term aftermath or consequences of Þórr's adventure, that specific lack of a reference implies a return to normality for Þórr and the other gods. Saxo, however, concludes his description of the rape of Rindr by openly acknowledging the castigation Óðinn receives from the other gods:

At dii, quibus præcipua apud Byzantium sedes habebatur, Othinum variis maiestatis detrimentis divinitatis gloriam maculasse cernentes collegio suo submovendum

duxerunt. Nec solum primatu eiectum, sed etiam domestico honore cultuque spoliatum proscribendum curabant, satius existimantes probrosi antistitis potentiam subrui quam publicæ religionis habitum profanari, ne vel ipsi alieno crimine implicati insontes nocentis nomine punirentur. Videbant enim apud eos, quos ad deferendos sibi divinitatis honores illexerant, vulgato maioris dei ludibrio, obsequium contemptu, religionem rubore mutari, sacra pro sacrilegio duci, statas sollemnesque cærimonias puerilium deliramentorum loco censi. Mors prae oculis, metus in animis erat, et in omnium caput unius culpam recidere putares. Hunc itaque, ne publicam religionem exulare cogeret, exilio multantes Ollerum quendam non solum in regni, sed etiam in divinitatis infulas subrogavere, tamquam deos ac reges creare in æquo positum foret.

[But the gods, whose chief seat was then at Byzantium, seeing that Othinus had tarnished the glorious name of godhead by various injuries to its majesty, thought that he ought to be removed from their society. And they not only had him ejected from the headship, but had him outlawed and stripped of all worship and honour at home, thinking it better that the power of their infamous leader should be overthrown than that public religion should be profaned; and fearing that they might themselves be involved in the sin of another, and though guiltless be punished for the crime of the guilty. For they saw, now the defamation of their great god was brought to light, that those whom they had tricked into offering them divine honours were exchanging obsequiousness for contempt and worship for shame; that holy rites were being accounted sacrilege, and fixed and regular ceremonies deemed so much childish absurdity. Fear was in their souls, death before their eyes, and one would have supposed that the fault of one was visited upon the heads of all. So, not wishing that one person drive public religion into exile, they exiled him and put one Ollerus in his place, to bear the symbols not only

of royalty but also of godhead, as though it had been as easy a task to create a god as a king.]²²¹

The extent of Óðinn's shame is expressed in the strongest possible terms here, and even though Saxo manifestly holds the false gods in contempt he nevertheless uses them as a mouthpiece to express the severity of Óðinn's transgression. Indeed, the strength of their feeling is exacerbated by their own debasement: it is a transgression too far, even by their own questionable standards.

Óðinn's disgrace and banishment, coupled with the physical abuse that he suffered at Rindr's hands, raise a vitally important aspect of the god's various powers and authority: few, if any, of the god's abilities are inherent to him, but instead must be acquired through sacrifice and trial; they do not come 'free of charge', as McKinnell has it.²²² The most memorable and demonstrative instances of Óðinn's willingness to undergo such trials are his sacrifice of an eye in the well of Mímir and his hanging of himself upon Yggdrasill, both actions being undertaken for the acquisition of wisdom, although our exact understanding of both actions is uncertain.²²³ Indeed, Turville-Petre described Óðinn's act of auto-strangulation as 'the highest conceivable form of sacrifice, in fact so high that, like many a religious mystery, it surpasses our comprehension.'²²⁴ The same is true, although less transparently, of other powers that Óðinn has acquired: his mastery of poetry is a consequence of his theft, at great personal risk, of the mead of poetry, and his mastery of magic is obtained, as has been demonstrated, at the cost of his manliness.²²⁵ The overwhelming sense is that a significant number of the functions over which Óðinn claims

²²¹ Saxo Grammaticus (1931) 72.

²²² McKinnell (1994) 102.

²²³ Óðinn's sacrifice of an eye is recounted in *Völuspá* 27-8, and his hanging is referenced in *Hávamál* 138-41. Óðinn's act of self-strangulation may in fact reflect Sámi shamanic practices whereby knowledge of the other world is obtained through ritualised asphyxiation; see Price (2002) 215 and Kure (2006) 69-70. The sacrificial overtones of the act are recognised by the scholarly consensus; see Clunies Ross (1994a) 224. See also Wanner (2012) 1-3, which discusses the implications of Óðinn's missing eye in the light of other divine injuries, and McKinnell (2007b) 92-5 for a Christianised reading of Óðinn's hanging.

²²⁴ Turville-Petre (1964) 48.

²²⁵ Schjødt (2008) 108-224 has argued at length that a great many of Óðinn's actions can be seen as initiation practices designed to empower him.

patronage are not his by birth, but rather are acquired skills. In much the same way as he is not literally the all-father but is referred to as such as a personal honorific, Óðinn is not the originator of these powers but is rather a figure who emulates them. In one sense, therefore, this makes Óðinn's mastery of some of his powers, particularly that of sorcery, something profoundly unnatural; it is noticeable that none of the female magic users that Óðinn encounters, or indeed any others featured elsewhere in the literature, have to undergo violent or shameful trials to acquire their powers. The implication is that Óðinn is usurping a specifically female power for his own ends, but in so doing must in some sense fight against the natural order of the world: unnatural powers come at the cost of unnatural actions.

The literature also seems to raise questions concerning the validity and competency of Óðinn's mastery over these powers. A prominent example of this would be the poem *Völuspá*, where an interrogation of the strength and efficiency of Óðinn's powers and authority constantly underscores the foreground narrative. The specific characterisation of the *völva* herself will be examined in depth in a later section of this thesis (3.3.2), but her interaction with Óðinn reveals a great deal about the character of the god and the scope of his power. The *völva*'s oft-repeated taunt of *vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?* 'will you know more, or what?' seems designed to highlight the superiority of her far-seeing compared to Óðinn's abilities, but when it is used for the first time in the poem it is clearly linked to a specific image of Óðinn's sacrifice:²²⁶

Á sér hon ausaz aurgom forsi
af veði Valföðrs - vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?

²²⁶ McKinnell (1994) 112 proposes an alternative reading of the *völva*'s repeated refrain, whereby it highlights Óðinn's courage in the face of the dreadful vision of his future: that he permits the *völva* to carry on is evidence of this. Whilst this is a viable reading, it seems to me that the clear antagonism of the *völva* suggests that mockery of the god may be her main intention, even if he receives it in a different way.

[She sees a river with a the muddy waterfall flow from the pledge of Father of the
Slain – will you know more, or what?]²²⁷

The *völva* demonstrates the extent of her knowledge by showing that she knows of the god's sacrifice of an eye (the pledge referred to). Not only does this imply that her visions are stronger and wider reaching than his, but it also serves to emphasise the weakness of Óðinn's ability: not only is the god's knowledge seen to be less far-reaching than the *völva*'s, but his fallibility and the necessity of his making personal sacrifices for the sake of power is highlighted. This follows a general literary trend: whilst it has been pointed out that the sources are not consistent on the nature and role of Mímir, the one element of the story that appears in every version is the concept of Óðinn having to sacrifice something, and thus this seems to be a deeply entrenched idea.²²⁸ The acknowledgement of the god's sacrifice harks back to the opening stages of the poem, where the *völva* gives a brief history of herself; it is clear that she has not had to go through any kind of trial nor perform any sacrifice.²²⁹ That aspects of the histories of both characters are presented suggests an implicit invitation to compare both their experience and their powers, and indeed the next two stanzas elaborate on this:

Ein sat hon úti, þá er inn aldni kom,
Yggiungr ása, ok í augo leit:
'hvers fregnið mik? hví freistið min?
allt veit ek, Óðinn, hvar þú auga falt:
í inom mæra Mímis brunni!
Drekkir mið Mímir morgin hverian

²²⁷ 'Völuspá' 27.

²²⁸ Schjødtt (2008) 114-5.

²²⁹ Alternatively, it is possible that the *völva* is already dead and has been summoned from her grave, as is made clear in the case of the *völva* of *Baldur's draumar*. This would fit with the received wisdom that death brings with it knowledge, for which see McKinnell (1994) 115-116 and Lionarons (2005) 293-4 for an analysis of how such a reading would fit with *Völuspá*. It is difficult, however, to view the act of dying as a trial in any meaningful sense, particularly in view of its inevitability.

af weði Valfǫðrs - vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?

Valði henni Herfǫðr hringa ok men,

fekk spiðll spaklig ok spáganda -

sá hon vítt ok um vítt of veröld hveria.

[She sat outside alone when the ancient one came, Terrible One of the Æsir, and he looked in her eyes: ‘Why do you question me? Why do you test me? I know everything, Óðinn, where you hid your eye in the famous well of Mímir.’ Every morning Mímir drinks mead from Father of the Slain’s pledge – will you know more, or what? Father of Hosts chose rings and necklaces for her, he got wise speech and a prophecy-wand – she saw widely and yet more widely through every world.’]²³⁰

These verses are the first to give a sense of context to the poem: the identity of the *völva*’s interlocutor is revealed, and the details of the their transaction are given prominence. The *völva* once again taunts Óðinn over his sacrifice of an eye, and with the context of the poem now established it is apparent that it is directly inflammatory.²³¹ Despite trading his eye for wisdom, Óðinn’s ability to perceive time is still inferior to that of the female figure whose powers are presumably natural to her: this is further emphasised by the static state in which she describes herself. Though Óðinn has, in the past, made a bargain for wisdom at the price of self-mutilation, he nevertheless is forced to undertake further action to add to his stock of wisdom: unlike the static and omniscient *völva*, Óðinn is required to journey

²³⁰ ‘Vǫluspá’ 28-9.

²³¹ This antagonism is not necessarily specific to Óðinn: McKinnell (2001) 398 notes a consistent antagonism between *völur* and their male interlocutors.

forth to seek her out and having found her must undertake yet another transaction, this time in trading valuable items of jewellery in order to enjoy the benefit of her powers.²³²

The necessity of the economic transaction serves, yet again, to underscore Óðinn's position relative to the power he wishes to use: despite having already made a considerable sacrifice for the power of knowledge, his mastery and understanding of it are imperfect to the extent that he must continue to make sacrifices for the use of it.²³³ Not only does the *völva*, one naturally born to the power of far-seeing, make a profit on her power where Óðinn makes a loss, but her hostility and obscurity to some extent characterise the nature of Óðinn's relationship to magic: lacking a proper name or specified ancestry, but importantly bearing a gender that is emphasised through the repeated use of female pronouns, the *völva* is primarily identified with her profession and her gender. Her mockery of Óðinn can be read as a comment on the tension created by the male god's interaction with a specifically feminine power; the sometimes obscure quality of her vision, particularly in terms of her final vision of the dragon Níðhöggr which is left unexplained by the *völva*'s sudden departure, furthermore highlights Óðinn's lack of mastery over that power.²³⁴ We must conclude that the true meaning of the ending is as obscure and open to interpretation for Óðinn as it is for the audience of the poem.²³⁵ If the wisdom he gained from the sacrifice of his eye is flawed to the extent that he must seek further wisdom from the *völva*, then here as well there is a sense that Óðinn has been short-changed: his vision of the future is still incomplete by the end of the poem, as it was at the start.

There is a sense, perhaps, that Óðinn is the butt of some great cosmic joke, or at the very least that he has made a foolish mistake. It has been argued that Óðinn has foolishly

²³² Raudvere (2012) 106-8 asserts that the static and immobile image of the *völva* marks the end of 'harmony' in the poem, which perhaps emphasises the overt realisation of the antagonism between the *völva* and Óðinn.

²³³ Tolley (2009) 151 argues that the economic transaction between man and *völva* is akin to prostitution.

²³⁴ McKinnell (1994) 114.

²³⁵ Vésteinn Ólason (2013) 31.

bargained his eye, and sacrificed himself to himself, for the benefit of wisdom, when what he actually needs is knowledge.²³⁶ If this is a viable reading of Óðinn's situation in Norse cosmic history, then it agrees with the theory that Óðinn's mastery of the powers he has acquired is suspect. It betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the natural working of the world on Óðinn's part: the accessing of these powers may strengthen the god in terms of direct action, but the overall effect is a weakening of his position insofar as he opens himself up to vulnerabilities on a variety of levels. To some extent this links in with one of Óðinn's defining characteristics, that he is a wanderer: although Óðinn's motives and actions are characteristically obscure, a great deal of his time seems to be spent in the pursuit of new powers and influence. Not only does this aspect of him give the sense that Óðinn is detached from the society that he purports to govern, but the futility of his wandering is underscored by the certainty of his mortality. The *völva* herself draws attention to Óðinn's inevitable death in *Völuspá* 53 as part of her description of the events of *ragnarök*, as does Vafþrúðnir at the climax of *Vafþrúðnismál*,²³⁷ the moment at which Óðinn achieves the knowledge he has sought is undercut by the revelation of his own mortality, a fact which serves to undermine the credibility of the god.²³⁸ The fact that his weakness is seen to be observed makes it all the more damaging.²³⁹ Óðinn's great tragedy is that, for all his power and cunning, he is never allowed an absolute victory: this is one element of his character that resists redefinition.

The sense of the repercussions of Óðinn's search for power is also highlighted in *Ynglinga saga*, with a stronger focus on the impact it has on the concept of kingship. This saga, though ostensibly presented as history, in fact is very much cast in a mythic mode,

²³⁶ Abram (2011) 158.

²³⁷ Ármann Jakobsson (2008a) 274-5.

²³⁸ McKinnell (1994) 100, taking a different view of *Vafþrúðnismál*, argues that Óðinn is using his knowledge of his own fated death to achieve a cunning victory over Vafþrúðnir: if the god is fated to die at the jaws of Fenrir, then he cannot lose his head to the giant.

²³⁹ Jochens (1996) 42-3 makes the point that the *völva* has seen further and deeper into Óðinn's private transaction than Vafþrúðnir has, which may be another signifier of the relative abilities of male and female seers.

and thus its use of symbols and images is useful in understanding the manner in which certain concepts were regarded in the popular imagination of Snorri's time.²⁴⁰ Indeed, it has been argued that *Ynglinga saga* is the closest literary parallel to *Gylfaginning*.²⁴¹ Attention has previously been drawn to the description of Óðinn's magical powers in *Ynglinga saga*, and in particular his use of *seiðr*, earlier on in this section. The saga as a whole, however, is further concerned with different aspects of unnatural power and the impact they have on kingship. Óðinn is not only the progenitor of the Ynglingar but is also the figure who introduces the theme of supernatural power, which becomes a defining trait amongst his descendents. This is particularly true of the figures who descend from the euhemerised Freyr: these early, fully human generations of the royal family to some extent are used by Snorri, and by the poet of *Ynglingatal*, on which Snorri's work is based, to interrogate anxieties concerning the power and vulnerabilities of monarchy.²⁴² A large number of the figures in this catalogue of kings find themselves embroiled with supernatural agents, usually with lethal consequences for the monarch involved, and a great many of these in some sense reflect upon Óðinn's engagement with different kinds of supernatural power.²⁴³

Lassen has argued that Óðinn's powers are not out of place in *Ynglinga saga* insofar as they parallel powers demonstrated by other *fornaldarsögur* kings; whilst this is true, it is also possible to consider the magical actions of several kings in the saga as a reflection on Óðinn's personal practices.²⁴⁴ Three prominent kings of the Ynglingar are, like Óðinn, sorcerers themselves: Dagr, Huggleikr, and Aun.²⁴⁵ Each king showcases a

²⁴⁰ Lindow (2003) 95.

²⁴¹ Schjødtt (2008) 98.

²⁴² *Ynglingatal* is attributed to the Norwegian skald Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni, and is generally held to be authentically ninth century; see Simek (1993) 378. A prominent counter-argument, suggesting a twelfth century date for the poem, was suggested by Krag (1991), though this was contradicted in a number of subsequent studies, including Sapp (2000) and Sundqvist (2004).

²⁴³ For a detailed survey of the Ynglingar in other Old Norse sources, see Sundqvist (2012) 237-9.

²⁴⁴ Lassen (2006) 280.

²⁴⁵ Their stories are recounted in *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 35-6, 42-3, and 47-50 respectively.

different approach to sorcery, though the inevitability of their magical acts leading to their death is a recurring theme; as Mitchell puts it, ‘once magical power is introduced among the Ynglings, it haunts them.’²⁴⁶ Dagr is described as a wise man who, like Óðinn, can understand the speech of birds. As a parallel to Óðinn’s ravens, Dagr’s familiar is a sparrow, and the saga draws a linguistic parallel between the two rulers and their fowls: of Óðinn’s ravens it says *flugu þeir víða um lönd ok sǫgðu honum mǫrg tíðendi* ‘they flew widely over lands and told him much news’;²⁴⁷ of Dagr it says *hann átti spǫrr einn, er honum sagði mǫrg tíðendi. Flaug hann á ymsi lönd* ‘he had a sparrow, which told him many things; he flew to various lands.’²⁴⁸ A comparison is clearly being drawn here between the two figures, but a separate conclusion is also reached: whilst the contribution that Óðinn’s ravens make to his wisdom, and thus ultimately to his glory and success, is acknowledged by Snorri early on, there is a profound sense of bathos in the fall of King Dagr, who dies on a farmer’s pitchfork after leading an ill-advised military campaign to avenge the death of his sparrow. The sparrow, being substantially smaller and less visually impressive than a raven, becomes a symbol of the king’s implied foolishness in investing himself emotionally and physically in the trappings of sorcery: he dies for the sake of a most insubstantial creature. Whereas Óðinn is portrayed as a great war-leader, his descendant’s reliance on magic leads not to a glorious death in battle, but to a shameful one.

The saga’s consideration of the anxious relationship between military and magical power is further developed in the case of King Hagleikr. The extent and nature of his magical powers are not discussed, but it is clearly stated that in his entourage *hann hafði ok með sér seiðmenn ok alls konar fjölkunnigt fólk* ‘he also had with him *seiðr* practitioners

²⁴⁶ Mitchell (2011) 86.

²⁴⁷ *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 19.

²⁴⁸ *Ynglinga saga* 35.

and all kinds of magic users.’²⁴⁹ Little more is said of King Huggleikr, except that when he is attacked by an alliance of champions, his battle force quickly succumbs. One possible implication of this episode, taken together with that of Dagr, is that none of Óðinn’s descendents is capable of fusing the arts of military and magical power in the successful manner of their forbear. Not only does this emphasise the disconnection between the perceived male sphere of physical strength and the female sphere of magical power, but it also emphasises the extent of how unnatural Óðinn’s synthesis of these two powers is.

The final example of a king using magic in *Ynglingar saga* is Aun, and Snorri’s treatment of him is substantially different from that of the other two kings considered here, although Aun too is presented as a poor general, losing and subsequently fleeing every battle in which he takes part. Aun’s magical action takes the form of filicide: he sacrifices his sons, nine in total, to Óðinn in exchange for longevity. There is, of course, an irony present in attempting to obtain immortality through the intervention of a figure who is, both in his euhemerised form in this saga and in his divine aspect more generally, famously mortal; there is, also, characteristically an unforeseen consequence of the deal with Óðinn, for whilst Aun’s life is indeed prolonged beyond all natural limits, he continues to age at the normal rate.²⁵⁰ With each filial sacrifice Aun’s body becomes further ruined until eventually he is reduced to a state where *drakk hann horn sem lébarn* ‘he drank from a horn like a baby.’²⁵¹ The reduction and ruination of the king’s body is paralleled in the effect on his country: not only does it have to endure several successful invasions, but with each son sacrificed Aun also gives up a portion of his kingdom. What is being demonstrated here is that there is an incompatibility between magic, particularly of a notionally female kind, and male royal power: the three kings just discussed might not

²⁴⁹ *Ynglinga saga* 42-3.

²⁵⁰ There are several parallels in other texts to King Aun’s sacrifice of his sons, meaning it is not an isolated incident. See Harris (2007) 162.

²⁵¹ *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 49.

themselves be seen to be approaching powerful women for their own advancement, but in utilising the female skills that Óðinn emulated and Freyja originated, they are nevertheless compromising their own masculine identities, even while they attempt to redefine that power to support their own royal identity.

Mitchell has argued that the deaths of the Ynglingar kings, and not just those mentioned above, parallel Óðinn's magical practices;²⁵² this argument can be extended to suggest that it is possible to read a large part of *Ynglinga saga* as a direct critique of Óðinn's policies, insofar as a majority of his descendents can be seen to succumb to forces that he himself either represents or has striven to control, and in particular his use of magic appears to have a profoundly negative effect on his dynasty. The sense of his engagement with *seiðr* seems to be not only unnatural through his use of it as a man, but also through his use of it as a king. Schjødt has argued that kingship is a spiritual condition that involves the imposition of Óðinn's blessing;²⁵³ if this is the case, then perhaps it is also a condition which carries the contamination of Óðinn's mistakes. The king is the representative of a patriarchal society constructed on a basis of economic and military might: the marginalised and feminised concept of magical power would seem to be an antithetical image to that of monarchy. This, consequently, reflects negatively on Óðinn: the reader is encouraged to see in many of the Ynglingar kings a reflection of Óðinn's mistakes and inadequacies, particularly with regard to his meddling with supernatural powers and agents. Price has argued that Óðinn's mastery of sex in some sense excuses him of, or protects him from, the negative consequences of *seiðr* use, but the textual evidence does not support this.²⁵⁴ Clunies Ross's argument that Óðinn practises *seiðr* as an individual rather than a group leader constitutes a similarly problematic excuse.²⁵⁵ The text of *Ynglinga saga*, by

²⁵² Mitchell (2011) 86.

²⁵³ Schjødt (2012) 74.

²⁵⁴ Price (2002) 214.

²⁵⁵ Clunies Ross (1994a) 211.

characterising Óðinn as the progenitor and model of kings so forcefully, makes it impossible not to view him entirely as a group leader. The overall effect is one of a retrospective undermining of Óðinn's reputation that serves to emphasise the recurring theme of his attempts to control powers that are not natural to him or to his biological gender. In attempting to redefine female power as an expression of his own monarchical power, his short-term gains are offset by a far greater and lasting vulnerability that extends beyond his own person.

1.4. Loki

1.4.1. Introduction

It has become usual, even a cliché, to begin any scholarly inquiry into the nature or function of Loki by making reference to the problems scholars face in attempting to analyse so enigmatic and inscrutable a character. Loki is, and always has been, a problem for scholars; in the words of Gabriel Turville-Petre, ‘More ink has been spilled on Loki than on any other figure in Norse myth. This, in itself, is enough to show how little scholars agree, and how far we are from understanding him.’²⁵⁶ More recently, Stephanie von Schnurbein began her overview of the critical appreciation of Loki in *Snorra Edda* by stating:

Loki, the outsider in the Northern Germanic pantheon, confounds not only his fellow deities and chronicler Snorri Sturluson but has occasioned as much quarrel among his interpreters. Hardly a monograph, article, or encyclopedic entry does not begin with the reference to Loki as a staggeringly complex, confusing, and ambivalent figure who has been the catalyst of countless unresolved scholarly controversies and has elicited more problems than solutions.²⁵⁷

There have been a number of landmark studies of the god, all of which have posited a different genesis for Loki’s character. Jacob Grimm argued that Loki was a fire deity, a view later popularised by the characterisation of Loge in the works of Richard Wagner.²⁵⁸ Near the end of the nineteenth century Sophus Bugge argued that Loki was probably derived from the figure of Lucifer.²⁵⁹ Following the Second World War, Georges Dumézil concluded that Loki was the incarnation of an impulsive intelligence that was paralleled in

²⁵⁶ Turville-Petre (1964) 324.

²⁵⁷ von Schnurbein (2000) 109.

²⁵⁸ Grimm (1875-8), vol 1, 199.

²⁵⁹ Bugge (1881-89) 70-9.

other Indo-European mythologies.²⁶⁰ Shortly thereafter, Folke Ström concluded that Loki was a hypostasis of Óðinn.²⁶¹ This was followed by Jan de Vries who, building on his earlier work, put forward the influential argument that Loki was a ‘trickster’ god of the kind found in the mythology of the native Americans.²⁶² In an extensive study founded on the extant literary evidence, Anna Birgitta Rooth came to the conclusion that Loki had originated as an apotheosised spider.²⁶³ Rooth’s work was followed a year later by an influential article by Anne Holtsmark, who disagreed with all previous attempts to find a source for Loki and instead argued that he was a composite figure who encapsulated a large number of medieval literary concepts and motifs, and who must consequently be treated individually in each separate appearance in the literature.²⁶⁴ It is this last approach that has had the largest impact on modern scholarship, the general consensus now being that no single unified theory of Loki is possible.²⁶⁵

It is clear that Loki’s complex nature has generated a considerable and divergent amount of scholarly discourse, and that it is often hard to reconcile all the elements of his apparently incoherent character as they appear across a large array of different myths. Despite his contradictory nature his importance to the construction of the Old Norse literary universe, and subsequently the depth of his entrenchment in the mythology, seems confirmed by the frequency with which he appears as a character in individual myths that would not work without his presence.²⁶⁶ It is perhaps unnecessary to attempt to forge a coherent character out of Loki: he is, if nothing else, consistently inconsistent, and this in fact seems an important aspect of his character. I follow Schjødts line in describing Loki’s

²⁶⁰ Dumézil (1949)

²⁶¹ Ström (1956)

²⁶² de Vries (1959) 1-10.

²⁶³ Rooth (1961) 200-10.

²⁶⁴ Holtsmark (1962) 81-9.

²⁶⁵ Heide (2011) has recently suggested that there may in fact be two completely separate characters called Loki in the mythology, and that the compilers of this mythological material were aware of the distinction between the two – an interesting thought, but there is in reality little in our medieval texts that supports this.

²⁶⁶ McKinnell (1994) 29.

primary function as a creature of the margins.²⁶⁷ Since Loki is one who is not quite part of the Æsir, his function is that of the ‘intermediary *par excellence*’:²⁶⁸ he can do things and go places that the Æsir either cannot or will not.²⁶⁹ That Loki’s services are retained by the Æsir seems largely a matter of utility: he is an enabler, useful to them as a figure who can act on their behalf for their betterment. It is this function, however, that also renders Loki a dangerous figure: though he is not one of the Æsir, his role as an enabler grants him unparalleled access to them, and in gaining such access he is capable of exposing and exploiting their vulnerabilities.²⁷⁰ If any kind of continuity to his character can be described, Loki’s progression from assistant of the gods to their adversary to some extent parallels the moral and material disintegration of the world.²⁷¹ Regardless of whether his character can be described as coherent, it is clear that Loki serves no overarching religious function, and that he serves multiple and often contradictory roles.²⁷²

In view of Loki’s mercurial character, it is often appropriate to consider him more in the role of reactor than actor: whilst he does play an important role in most of the stories in which he features, nevertheless one of his major functions from a narrative perspective is to react to the characters and events around him, and thus in some sense to inform our understanding of them. Loki is most frequently paired with Óðinn or Þórr, and as a result it is often his task, directly or indirectly, to hold a mirror up to their characters.²⁷³ The nature of this reflective relationship is, as will be demonstrated, remarkably consistent, even in the progression of Loki from Óðinn’s blood-brother to his accuser, and from being Þórr’s batman to the father of his destroyer.

²⁶⁷ Schjødtt (1981) 49-86.

²⁶⁸ von Schnurbein (2000) 115.

²⁶⁹ For a discussion of the extent to which Loki can be seen as part of the Æsir, see Lindow (1997) 53 ff.

²⁷⁰ Frakes (2002) 164.

²⁷¹ Schjødtt (1981) 76-84.

²⁷² Price (2002) 323.

²⁷³ Turville-Petre (1964) 128.

This section will focus on Loki's approach to gender, and his interactions with empowered female figures. Loki's appropriation of, and response to, various concepts of gendered power overlap with the actions of Þórr and Óðinn: seduction, procreation, sexual domination, cross-dressing and *seiðr*, amongst others, are elements of power play that are ascribed to all three figures. In spite of this overlap, there is nevertheless a sense that Loki utilises these manifestations in a subtly different way from the other two figures; in the construction of these myths, Loki's use of, or reaction to, gendered power and empowered females often serves to shed light on the comparable actions of another male figure.

1.4.2. Loki and the Performance of Femininity

As mentioned above, Loki engages with feminised concepts of power in a similar manner to Þórr and Óðinn, one manifestation of which is the act of cross-dressing. Loki adopts a female guise on several different occasions, notably more frequently than Þórr and Óðinn do. Several of the instances of Loki redefining himself into a female coincide with Óðinn and Þórr engaging in the same activity, and as a result Loki's presence and actions often throw a different light on the other gods' actions.

Þórr's cross-dressing actions in the poem *Þrymskviða* have been discussed above (in 1.2.4.), but this poem also describes, in detail, Loki's capacity for cross-dressing, and in so doing greatly informs our understanding of Þórr's position. Þórr has been acknowledged as, in many respects, the polar opposite of Loki, and one way in which this is evident is that the latter is clearly the more accomplished female impersonator of the two gods.²⁷⁴ Not only is his disguise never questioned, but on two occasions it is necessary for him to use his verbal and mental dexterity to explain away the shortcomings in Þórr's feminine performance, namely his monstrous appetite and his fearsome warrior's glare:

Sat in alsnotra ambótt fyrir,

²⁷⁴ von Schnurbein (2000) 123.

er orð um fann við iqtuns máli:

‘Át vætr Freyia átta nóttom,
svá var hón óðfús í iqtunheima!’

[...]

Sat in alsnotra ambótt fyrir,

er orð um fann við iqtuns máli:

‘Svaf vætr Freyia átta nóttom,
svá var hon óðfús í iqtunheima!’

[The very clever handmaid sat in front, who found an answer to the giant’s speech:

‘Freyja ate nothing/did not sleep for eight nights, so eager was she to come to giant-land’].²⁷⁵

Whilst these excuses seem comic in intent, they do nevertheless draw attention to Loki’s relative successfulness at passing for a female: his female identity remains unquestioned. The poem itself, furthermore, emphasises the respective qualities of their disguises through the use of language, in so far as Þórr continues to be referred to by his own name or appropriate pronouns and periphrases, whilst post-transformation Loki is referred to exclusively as *in alsnotra ambótt* ‘the very clever handmaid’, which may potentially be indicative of a biological transformation into a woman.²⁷⁶

These two stanzas are also important insofar as they to some extent portray, or attempt to portray, a sense of the understanding of female psychology on Loki’s part. Taken at face value, it portrays Loki as a credible authority on a specific kind of female mentality: his excuses, though comic, are nevertheless successful in assuaging the doubts of a community of giants that the poem makes clear contains at least one female figure. This is, to some extent, a tacit validation that Loki has some insight into the workings of

²⁷⁵ ‘Þrymskviða’ 26 & 28.

²⁷⁶ McKinnell (2000) 5.

the female mind, or at the very least that he can portray a sense of insight that agrees with the monstrous mentality of a giantess: his redefinition of Þórr in the image of Freyja-Þórr is accepted by a mixed-gender society. On the other hand, however, to all but the most misogynistic readers of the poem it is clear that Loki's characterisation of Þórr is hardly a realistic representation of female mentality, or even of female sexual desire. The situation can be read, consequently, as demonstrating that there is an underlying chauvinism to Loki's conception of a female mentality: successful though his construction of Þórr's female identity is, it is reliant on an exaggerated caricature of female sexuality. If the situation is read thus, then it undermines the quality of Loki's female disguise as well because it reveals to the reader an essentially patriarchal mindset; in much the same way as the climax of the story involves the revelation of Þórr's masculine nature beneath his bridal attire (and the story of the rape of Rindr climaxes in the revelation of Óðinn's masculine genitalia, as shown in 1.3.3.), so to do these final interjections, his last speech acts of the poem, serve to demonstrate Loki's underlying masculine nature. It means, consequently, that Loki's female disguise can be seen to be just as superficial and questionable as Þórr's disguise, but whereas Þórr's discomfort with and ignorance of the female form and mentality are palpable, Loki more troublingly seems to be falsely presenting himself as an expert on the subject.

An alternative reading of the situation, however, is that there is some justification to Loki's portrayal of female sexual desire as something rampant and lustful. Þórr is not characterised as an every-woman, but specifically as the goddess Freyja. To some extent the poem plays on her reputation for sexual promiscuity (though this reputation will be questioned in 2.4.3.);²⁷⁷ the extreme indignation she expresses when it is assumed that she will willingly marry Prymr seems intended to be comic, particularly when it presupposes

²⁷⁷ This is a commonly accepted facet of Freyja's character; see, for example, Turville-Petre (1964) 175.

that the audience is already aware of her reputation.²⁷⁸ To some extent it is irrelevant as to whether or not this is an accurate description of Freyja's sexual habits; what is important is that Loki chooses to characterise Freyja-Þórr as creature of grotesque sexual appetite. It serves, yet again, to demonstrate the reduction of feminine identity to that of a sexualised object by a male god, a redefinition of female attributes to assist a male agenda. Þrymr's acceptance of Loki's characterisation of Freyja-Þórr's monstrous sexuality suggests a tacit agreement, a sense that both the giant and the god share a similar masculine ideology.

Þrymr's readiness to be deceived to some extent also suggests the nature of his expectations: he desires to marry Freyja, an act in itself that sexualises her and redefines her into the role of a wife, but the revelation of Freyja-Þórr's sexual appetite must be a situation that he is eager to accept as it creates a scenario where her sexual desires either mirror or transcend his own. To some extent, therefore, Loki can be seen to be creating a male fantasy figure: the idea of the woman consumed with sexual desire for the man. In telling Þrymr exactly what he wants to hear, Loki makes his lies more convincing, and the giant's own desires become an accessory to his hoodwinking, which, though comic, has a serious undercurrent.²⁷⁹ Assuming that he is doing it consciously, Loki's construction of female identity in fact can be seen to rest upon a subtle use of power dynamics. As this thesis has already demonstrated, a great deal of the male conception of female power is invested in the sexual potential of the female body, which must be controlled or subdued. In constructing the identity of Freyja-Þórr, Loki both assumes and plays upon this masculine viewpoint; the result, however, serves to empower Þórr by making his disguise more convincing. Even as the image of the woman is rendered into a standard and depersonalised sexual entity, the man underneath it is inversely empowered by that image being accepted by the giants. Þórr paradoxically succeeds at his mission as a man because

²⁷⁸ McKinnell (2000) 4.

²⁷⁹ McKinnell (2000) 4.

he is marginalised as a woman through Loki's intervention: the redefinition of Þórr the woman to a purely sexual object serves to camouflage the nature of Þórr the man.

These stanzas in which Loki creates the identity of Freyja-Þórr also raise a fundamental problem concerning the conflation of gender identities. Þórr's monstrous appetite and his fearsome glare are ultimately the signifiers of his hyper-masculinity: they are the most pronounced features that serve to demonstrate the underlying masculinity of the Freyja-Þórr figure, and it is their prominence that threatens to dispel the illusion of his femininity. A tension arises, however, out of the manner of Loki's explanation for these physical factors: if they represent, as he argues, the manifestation of an extreme form of female sexuality, then in essence they are also being described as signifiers of hyper-femininity. This is, for obvious reasons, a troubling situation: Þórr has already expressed his fear that he will be considered *argr* for cross-dressing, but Loki's manipulation of the situation also renders Þórr's natural and bodily masculinity, which lies beneath his superficial disguise, as *argr* as well. It was argued previously (in 1.3.3.) that the placing of the hammer in the bride's lap creates the image of the woman with a phallus, and that this moment of gender blurring immediately precedes the moment of Þórr's triumph over the giants; in a sense Loki's comments foreshadow this effect. As the moment of Þórr's bi-gendered state approaches, his bodily characteristics are simultaneously defined as signifiers of both masculinity and femininity: they are rendered masculine by the reality of Þórr's body, but are also rendered feminine by the illusion Loki creates in his construction of Freyja-Þórr's identity, an illusion that is accepted as reality by the assembled giants. Through Loki's intervention, it is not the disguise that passes for female, but Þórr's actual but redefined bodily features. Whilst this empowers Þórr to the extent that it gives him the opportunity to act, it is also deeply shameful.

Whilst this analysis has so far focussed on the manner in which Loki as a character actively constructs female identities in *Prymskviða*, it is also important to consider the presentation of Loki's own female nature in the poem. It has already been remarked that Loki is a convincing and adept performer of femininity, particularly when compared to the lumbering Þórr. What is also interesting to note, however, is his willingness to take on the role:

Pá kvað þat Loki, Laufeyiar sonr:

‘Mun ek ok með þér ambótt vera:

vit skolom aka tvau í iǵtunheima!’

[Then Loki, the son of Laufey, said this: ‘I will go with you to be your handmaid; we two shall drive to giant-land!’]²⁸⁰

Þórr agrees to cross-dress only under duress within the poem, and in the wider context of Norse myth Óðinn's cross-dressing episodes have been seen to be accompanied by a sense of need or sacrifice, but Loki here seems entirely willing to take on the burden ‘with an alacrity which looks sexually questionable.’²⁸¹ This point at which he volunteers, furthermore, is very interesting in terms of the power dynamics at play in this poem. Jón Karl Helgason has demonstrated that Loki's vocal characteristics undergo an evolution.²⁸² Loki, he explains, begins the poem as a very passive figure, speaking only when spoken to, and largely acting as the messenger for another's voice. By the end of the poem, however, Loki has assumed both verbal and intellectual control of the situation; rather than his voice being used as a medium for reporting the intentions of others, he is now actively inventing the scenario that governs the situation. Jón Karl identifies the turning point of the poem as the moment at which Loki exclaims: ‘*Þegi þú, Þórr*’ ‘Be silent, Þórr’.²⁸³ Whilst I agree

²⁸⁰ ‘Prymskviða’ 20.

²⁸¹ McKinnell (2000) 4.

²⁸² Jón Karl Helgason (2002) 163-5.

²⁸³ ‘Prymskviða’ 18.

with his conclusions, the argument can be extended along gender lines. In silencing Þórr, Loki assumes control of the situation; Þórr has already rebuffed Heimdallr's attempts to clothe him in Freyja's garments. Loki, therefore, succeeds where Heimdallr has not, and he does so by removing Þórr's agency in the matter. The point at which Loki takes control is the moment at which Þórr is forced to surrender up his masculine identity and assume a female form. It is also important to note that this is the moment Loki commits himself to a female form as well: following his silencing of Þórr, who importantly never again engages in direct speech in the poem, Loki's next speech action is the stanza quoted above. It has already been shown that Loki does not have to be coerced into assuming a female form in the manner that Þórr does; it is, however, important to note that Loki does not ask for permission to accompany Freyja-Þórr as a handmaiden. He simply states it as fact, and there is no indication that he is challenged. As the gender roles are switched, so too is the power dynamic inverted: once they are both feminised the previously subservient Loki takes a position of intellectual authority over Þórr. It was previously argued that Þórr is empowering himself through his adoption of a female image; in the wider context of the social world presented in *Þrymskviða*, Þórr's constructed female form is empowered through the anonymity it gives him that allows him to complete his mission successfully. Within the enclosed social space of the relationship between Þórr and Loki, however, a different layer of power relations is presented: Loki is empowered to the extent that he becomes the driving force of the pair, and holds Þórr within his power. Indeed, it can be argued that Loki is empowered to a greater degree than Þórr by the fact that his portrayal of the female image is more accomplished.

Loki in *Þrymskviða* is thus involved in an engagement with empowered female identities on two separate levels: first in his own adoption of a female form as a means of self-empowerment and concealment, and secondly in his elaborate construction of Þórr's female identity. One, in a sense, can be seen to spring from the other: his acceptance of and

competence with a female appearance in some sense legitimises his construction of that same appearance on another less-willing body. To some extent his actions are comparable to the anti-female spells attributed to Óðinn (discussed in 1.3.2.), or are perhaps a hideous parody of them: by assuming some aspect of femininity, Loki is able to manipulate the sexual capital represented by the Freyja-Þórr figure in much the same way Óðinn takes sexual advantage of the female figures he encounters. There is, however, a sense that Loki moves beyond Óðinn's comfort zone: Óðinn's use of magic and seduction almost inevitably culminates in a sexual encounter, an act which as I have suggested serves to reaffirm the god's underlying masculinity, but this is not the case with Loki. In *Prymskviða* Loki is in no sense connected with any sexual act, unlike the figures of Freyja or Freyja-Þórr with whom he interacts; nor is he depicted as sexually active in his male form.²⁸⁴ Loki remains resolutely disconnected from sexual activity of any kind in the poem, so there is nothing physical to confirm or reaffirm his male or female gender role. It is also noticeable that the resolution of the poem gives no sense of what becomes of Loki: Þórr, though still clothed as a woman, reassumes his masculine activities, but no mention is made of Loki at all, leaving his gender ambiguous by the climax of the poem. Overall, the extent of Loki's transformation here is more pronounced than in any of the examples shown of the other two gods under discussion. Both his sexuality and his biological sex are rendered ambiguous and are seemingly subject to the god's own personal self-definition, a characteristic which overtly gives him power in the poem.

Whilst *Prymskviða* provides the clearest and most detailed account of Loki's cross-dressing, and one that presents a complex and multilayered approach to gender, there are other episodes in which he is shown to adopt a female appearance. It is also important to

²⁸⁴ Jón Karl Helgason (2002) 160 suggests there may be homosexual implications in the fact that Þórr and Loki appear to be sharing the same quarters at the opening of the poem, though this argument is tenuous in light of the fact that men sharing a sleeping space, without there being any sexual activity between them, would have been commonplace in medieval society.

make some kind of distinction between the act of cross-dressing and the quality of biological hermaphroditism; it is this aspect of Loki that will be examined in the following section.

1.4.3. Loki's Sexual Relationships

The previous section focused mainly on Loki's adoption of a female role for personal empowerment, in a manner similar to that of Þórr and Óðinn. In the case of these two gods, the emphasis is placed on the performative aspects of cross-dressing; though outwardly female, the reality of their underlying masculinity is of paramount importance. In Loki's case, however, the distinction between his outward appearance and his inherent gender is sometimes ambiguously blurred.²⁸⁵ It is also important to note that whilst Þórr's transformation in *Þrymskviða* is described in florid, even cringe-inducing, detail, Loki's transformation is not described at all: it simply happens.²⁸⁶ Loki is profoundly mercurial, showing a propensity for shape-shifting and gender-changing that is unmatched by any other figure.²⁸⁷ It is also important to note that, unlike Óðinn and Þórr, Loki does not seem to have to undergo any trial or make any noticeable sacrifice to achieve his empowered and transformed female states. Þórr's inept female performance serves to distract from the success of Loki's transformation; Loki undergoes a change so absolute and convincing that it must give the reader cause to question whether it truly is cross-dressing in the manner of Þórr, or whether it is a more profound transformation.

This tension is explored in *Lokasenna*. If *Þrymskviða* demonstrates how Loki's voice can be useful to the Æsir, and how his speech can be seen as tool for redefining figures, then *Lokasenna* focuses on 'the potency of Loki's speech and the other *æsir*'s

²⁸⁵ For a summary of Loki's bisexual characteristics, see Turville-Petre (1964) 129-32.

²⁸⁶ 'Þrymskviða' 15-19.

²⁸⁷ Ellis Davidson (1964) 178.

inability to match or counter it.’²⁸⁸ Loki’s ability to redefine characters through speech acts is demonstrated in this exchange, which Anderson has argued forms the main subject of the poem:²⁸⁹

Óðinn kvað:

‘Veitstu, ef ek gaf, þeim er ek gefa ne skylda,

inom slævorom, sigr:

átta vetr vartu fyr iðrð neðan

kýr mólkandi ok kona,

ok hefir þú þar *börn* borit,

ok hugða ek þat args aðal.’

Loki kvað:

‘En þik síða kóðo Sámseyo í,

ok draptu á vétt sem vǫlor;

vitka líki fórtu verþiód yfir,

ok hugða ek þat args aðal.’

Frigg kvað:

‘Ørlǫgom ykkrom skylit aldregi

segia seggiom frá,

hvat it æsir tveir drýgðoð í árdaga;

firriz æ forn rǫk firar.’

²⁸⁸ Wanner (2012) 7.

²⁸⁹ Anderson (2002) 145.

[Óðinn said: ‘You know, if I gave victory to the more faint-hearted, to whom I should not have given it: eight winters you were a woman milking cows beneath the earth, and there you have borne children, and I thought that the nature of an unmanly man.’ Loki said: ‘But they say you practiced *seiðr* on Sámsey, and you beat upon a magic drum as *völur* do; in a warlock’s shape you travelled over the world of men and I thought that the nature of an unmanly man’ Frigg said: ‘You should never tell people about the doings of the two of you, what you two Æsir got up to in days of old; always keep ancient matters concealed.’]²⁹⁰

Both of these accusations are very serious in nature.²⁹¹ This exchange, part of which was used in the discussion of Óðinn (in 1.3.3.), forces a juxtaposition between him and Loki. When discussed previously, the focus was on the figure of Óðinn, and the repercussions that this exchange has upon his character: Loki’s response, as I have argued, suggests that Óðinn’s magical practices are at least as bad as Loki’s actions, and Frigg’s attempt to silence both of them is a tacit acknowledgement that what they have said is true. The nature of Óðinn’s accusation, however, demonstrates the tension concerning Loki’s mercurial gender: his insult contains not only the accusation of cross-dressing, a manifestation of *ergi*, but also the allegation that Loki has given birth to children. Although we have no other reference to this specific episode in any extant literature, the poem encourages us to accept the validity of the insult.²⁹² The ability and willingness to assume not only a female appearance but also the female sexual organs establishes a fundamental difference between Loki and the other two gods under discussion. Óðinn’s statement also agrees with a common intellectual thread that runs through the various portrayals of Loki: he has, at various times, both fathered and given birth to offspring. For example, he has fathered the Fenrisúlfr, the Miðgarðsormr and Hel on the giantess Angrboða, but is himself

²⁹⁰ ‘Lokasenna’ 23-5.

²⁹¹ Schjødtt (2008) 211.

²⁹² Jochens (1996) 57.

the mother of the horse Sleipnir; the significance of Loki's children, and their relationship to their parent, will be discussed in detail towards the end of this present section. The important detail, however, is that Loki alone of all the beings of the Old Norse pantheon displays the primary sexual characteristics of both genders. This does not seem to derive from any historical change of sex he might have undergone, as seems to have happened with the Nerthus/Njörðr figure.²⁹³ Instead, it seems to have been an integral part of his characterisation from a very early stage.

Óðinn's dual accusation against Loki, both of cross-dressing and being female at times, can be read as more subtle than it first appears, and can be shown to fit with certain major themes of the poem. Borovsky has demonstrated convincingly that *Lokasenna* is a poem that focuses on the concept of blending.²⁹⁴ She establishes three different levels of blending within the poem, which are evident in Loki's promises to blend malice into the mead,²⁹⁵ his blending of blood with Óðinn in the pact of blood-brotherhood,²⁹⁶ and when he describes Freyja and Beyla of being *blandin miðk* 'greatly blended', an insult which in this context can only refer to an accusation of sexual misbehaviour.²⁹⁷ These she ties into a wider context of the concept of blending as something negative or insulting, particularly in the *Íslendingasögur*. This argument can, however, be extended. Loki's accusation that Freyja and Beyla exhibit a sexuality that is somehow 'blended' seems to denote both a sense of promiscuity and also unusual sexual practice, and fits in with the wider theme of his insults to the Ásynjur as a whole, the majority of whom he accuses of some variant of whoredom.²⁹⁸ The hypocrisy of this is self-evident, not least because many of their supposed adulteries were enacted with Loki himself.²⁹⁹ Furthermore, however, is the fact

²⁹³ Schjødt (2008) 395.

²⁹⁴ Borovsky (2002).

²⁹⁵ 'Lokasenna' 3.

²⁹⁶ 'Lokasenna' 9.

²⁹⁷ 'Lokasenna' 32 and 56.

²⁹⁸ Borovsky (2002) 4-5.

²⁹⁹ As asserted in 'Lokasenna' 40, 52, 54, and potentially implied in 30.

that if Óðinn's accusation is to be believed, then Loki's own sexual nature can be seen to be blended to a degree that exceeds that of the Ásynjur. Loki sets himself in a position of judgement that is rendered flawed by the nature of the accusations he makes: in some sense it echoes the element of Óðinn's dealings with women discussed previously (in 1.3.2.) whereby women are given social rules, concerning sexual and magical acts, which Óðinn himself flouts and encourages other men to flout. Loki's ambiguous nature is rendered simultaneously male and female, a state which might be seen as 'blended' in itself, grants him access to the attributes of two separate gender categories, a state which empowers him: Loki simultaneously possesses a woman's knowledge of the use and value of her own sexuality, and has a man's perspective and social prerogative of judgement. Loki's castigation of the goddesses for being sexually liberal is troubling in its unnaturalness: the Ásynjur are being chastised for manifesting a quality which, if we are to accept that medieval society was sympathetic to *Hávamál's* assertion of the innate mental and sexual fickleness of women, is inevitably and inescapably part of their nature. They are, furthermore, being attacked by a figure who is capable of making a conscious choice to go against his masculine nature and deliberately assume a female sexuality and sexual function. The conclusion seems to be that the potentially empowering qualities of female sexuality only become actually empowering within divine society if they are deliberately chosen: for actual female characters, the natural possession of this characteristic becomes a vulnerability that can be exploited by males.

Clunies Ross has argued that Sif's offer of mead to Loki in this poem is a coded offer of sexual availability.³⁰⁰ If this is the case, then it emphasises the thematic link between the concepts of blended elements and sexual intercourse which has already been suggested in the poem. Clunies Ross argues that the purpose of this is to emphasise Loki's otherness and subordinate status, and that his refusal to accept Sif's offer is indicative of

³⁰⁰ Clunies Ross (1994b) 56. See 'Lokasenna' 53.

the fact that he has already extracted sexual favours from the goddesses.³⁰¹ Whilst this is a persuasive reading of the situation, there are other possible interpretations. In the section on Þórr above (1.2.3.), it was observed that Sif's husband demonstrates a great deal of jealousy with regard to his wife's sexual behaviour. Given that a large part of the narrative of *Lokasenna* relies upon Þórr's absence, one could argue that Sif's level of sexual independence is being interrogated. Without Þórr in residence to regulate access to her body, she is to some extent a free agent. If Clunies Ross is correct in her reading of the situation, then perhaps Þórr is to some extent justified in his anxiety; Sif is sexually accessible to other men, and Loki is one of the figures that exploits such opportunities. In essence, Þórr's return at the end of the poem, and his driving away of Loki, is not just about silencing the rush of accusations, but also about guarding the goddesses against Loki's sexual predations;³⁰² if this is the case, however, Þórr is arguably not a very successful guard, given how Loki implies that he has often enjoyed the sexual favours of the Ásynjur.

To some extent Loki's self-appointed role as judge of a woman's use of her own sexual nature echoes the use of magic by Óðinn in *Hávamál* (discussed in 1.3.2.), a thematic relationship that intentionally or otherwise is emphasised by the close relationship between the two gods in *Lokasenna*. Both situations involve a male figure in taking on some aspect of female nature, and consequently forcibly asserting his right of control over the sexual capital of the women around him. The concept of blending, so important to *Lokasenna*, is indicated on several levels by the relationship between Óðinn and Loki in that poem. The poem specifically signposts the blending of their blood, achieved through the ritual of blood-brotherhood, which in some sense foreshadows the blending of their gender identities in the insults they level at each other. Despite the fact that Loki claims a

³⁰¹ Clunies Ross (1994b) 57.

³⁰² 'Lokasenna' 55-63.

number of sexual encounters with several of the Ásynjur, the veracity of which is implied but not confirmed, the only confirmed physical relationship he shares with any figure in the poem is his blood-brotherhood with Óðinn. The strength and validity of this relationship is confirmed by Óðinn's grudging acceptance of Loki at the table. The exact nature of the blood-brotherhood between Óðinn and Loki, and its implications, have been open to a variety of scholarly interpretation.³⁰³ Though it would perhaps be tenuous to read overmuch into the pseudo-sexual act of blending bodily fluids in the blood-brotherhood ritual as an analogue for Loki's later sexual conquests, it is nevertheless an intimate relationship between the two males that is recognized, and ascribed importance, in the poem. It is noticeable that his relationship with Óðinn is the only kind of social interaction in the poem that Loki does not actively slander; whilst his recognition of that relationship is a means to power, insofar as it allows him to command a place amongst the gods, nevertheless the fact that the veracity of it passes unchallenged in some sense validates it as one of the strongest social bonds in the poem.

The mixing of the gods' blood serves to link their actions in the poem: we see not only the contrast between Loki and Óðinn's individual appropriations of female characteristics, but also the connection. The poem's reminder of the physical link between them also suggests an element of contagion between the two gods: because of the intimacy of his relationship with Loki, Óðinn's actions are coloured by the other's presence and power.³⁰⁴ It has long been noted that the blood-brothers have much in common in terms of their abilities and characteristics, particularly their mastery of magic and their verbal dexterity.³⁰⁵ Indeed, Schjødtt has suggested that as Loki and Óðinn are the only two male gods associated with *seiðr* the ritual mixing of blood may represent an initiatory practice

³⁰³ Schjødtt (2008) 211.

³⁰⁴ Borovsky argues that Loki's slandering of Freyja and Beyla also carries an implicit accusation of contamination, which is to say that their sexual intercourse with him has in some sense resulted in their own moral corruption; whilst I agree with this, I think the argument may be more compellingly applied to Loki and Óðinn's relationship. See Borovsky (2002) 6.

³⁰⁵ Wanner (2012) 14.

whereby Loki's powers and abilities are transferred via the medium of blood into Óðinn; if this is the case, then it emphasises the concept of contagion.³⁰⁶

Within the context of *Lokasenna*, Óðinn's careful and delicate toeing of the gender-boundary, dressing as a *völva* to acquire a female power but without actually fully assuming a female physical form, is rendered unstable by the close apposition of a figure who has transcended the gender boundary to the extreme of adopting the female procreative process. There is a sense that just as the gods' blood is blended together, so too are their respective images; in this exchange, they come to occupy simultaneously an identical image, that of the woman doing womanly things. In this moment of overlap the distinction between Óðinn and Loki breaks down, the result of which is to render ambiguous Óðinn's adoption of female clothing given that Loki sees it as thematically following on from his own transgender episode: it raises the question of whether Óðinn has also transgressed the gender boundary to such an extent as to have changed his biological sex.³⁰⁷

The degree of overlap between the female identities of Óðinn and Loki in *Lokasenna* is further emphasised by Óðinn's silence on the matter. Either he is unable to produce a satisfactory response, or else is denied the opportunity of doing so. Unable to defend or justify himself, Óðinn's female aspect, as a magic user, is ironically marginalised within the patriarchal discourse taking place: despite his seniority amongst the gods, once his female image has been confirmed by Loki he loses the power of direct speech, his voice never heard in the poem thereafter. This means, furthermore, that he has no opportunity to differentiate himself from Loki, and that the overlap between their two actions and appearances, the *völva* and the mother, is allowed to stand unchallenged;

³⁰⁶ Schjødtt (2008) 213.

³⁰⁷ Price (2002) 216 has argued that some of the terminology relating to the practice of *seiðr* can be analysed to have connotations of bodily hermaphroditism; specifically, he suggests that the rare term *seiðberendr*, which is only ever applied to male figures, can be translated as 'magic womb-bearer'.

indeed, Frigg's response actively serves to enforce the similarity. She makes no distinction between Óðinn and Loki, and linguistically combines their respective feminising actions into a single unit that she expresses simply as *hvat it æsir tveir drýgðoð í árdaga* 'what you two Æsir got up to in days of old.'³⁰⁸ Frigg, echoing Óðinn's silence, refrains from providing a justification or defence for her husband's actions. In so doing, she brings the exchange between Óðinn and Loki to an end, but not to a conclusion; in one sense, her strategy in attempting to defend her husband is ultimately the thing that condemns him. The final image of Óðinn the poem provides thus leaves him in an emasculated, powerless and voiceless state, whereas Loki's belligerence runs almost unchecked from this point; there is a sense that Loki has in some way 'out-gendered' Óðinn, that he is empowered in the mythic present of the poem by the same process that Óðinn unsuccessfully underwent as a means of empowerment in the past. Loki's intellectual and sexual mastery in the poem becomes fully revealed as he demonstrates his mastery of the sexual excesses of both halves of his being. In *Lokasenna*, Loki succeeds as both alpha-male and alpha-female.

As well as the above reference in *Lokasenna*, there are two noticeable references to Loki's female procreative potential in eddic literature. The first of these is the following stanza from the *Völuspá in skamma* section of *Hyndluljóð*:

Loki át hiarta lindi brendo,
fann hann hálfsviðinn hugstein kono;
varð Loptr kviðugr af kono illri:
þaðan er á foldo flagð hvert komit.

³⁰⁸ 'Lokasenna' 25.

[Loki ate from a heart roasted on a linden-wood fire: he found the half-charred thought-stone of a woman. Loptr was made pregnant by an evil woman: from that every troll-woman on earth is descended.]³⁰⁹

As with Óðinn's accusation in *Lokasenna*, this episode is not known from elsewhere, nor is the identity of the woman known, though some have argued that it may be a reference to the figure of Gullveig.³¹⁰ Loki does not traditionally have a close association with troll-women, but it is possible to consider the way in which Loki's procreative process can be linked to concepts of mass supernatural destruction, as troll-women traditionally are.³¹¹ This is particularly relevant given the eschatological significance of some of Loki's other progeny, which will be explored below and indeed to which this episode in *Völuspá in skamma* might obliquely refer. This potential connection is perhaps supported by the brevity of the reference; we must to some extent assume that it would fit into received notions concerning Loki. Despite its lack of an explanation, this miniature vignette of Loki's adoption of a female nature has several interesting features. The central act of the stanza portrays a grotesque inversion of the sexual act: Loki (whom it must be assumed is in a male form in view of the poet's use of masculine pronouns), impregnated by a female force, plays the role of the receptive partner, who receives the life-giving essence through the incorrect orifice. By combining this act of procreation with that of cannibalism, the creation of physical bodies is juxtaposed with the consumption of physical bodies.³¹² This represents a perversion of the natural procreative process, where the production of offspring does not require the sacrifice or consumption of one of the partners.

³⁰⁹ 'Hyndlolióð' 41.

³¹⁰ Mundal (2002) 191-2.

³¹¹ Arnold (2005) 122-3.

³¹² There seems to be a deeply entrenched overlap between the practice of evil magic and the act of cannibalism, something which will be explored in greater later in this thesis; see Tolley (2009) 115 for more information.

The *Völuspá in skamma* stanza also relates to the ideas of contagion and rape discussed previously. Loki is presumably aware that the eating of the heart will result in his pregnancy. Inverting the previously discussed concept of male figures seizing control of female procreative functions, here some sort of female power seizes control of Loki's procreative potential, and in so doing forces him to accept the traditional female role as the bearer of offspring; the whole situation, though not overtly a rape, has clear overtones of it. A further anxiety concerning the process is raised by the apparent sense of contamination or contagion that accompanies the imagery in this stanza: the meat of the heart is internalised within Loki's physical body, and from within it exerts its influence over his form and function.

The other major reference in eddic materials to Loki adopting a female form for the purpose of procreation is the so-called Master-Builder story, where he adopts the form of a mare in order to distract the giant's stallion; the result of this union is Óðinn's steed, Sleipnir. Loki's parentage of Sleipnir is alluded to in *Völuspá in skamma*, but the only full account of the story occurs in *Snorra Edda*.³¹³ As with many of the details of Snorri's thirteenth-century rationalisation of Norse mythology, it has been argued that this element of the story is probably an invention of his, but if this is the case then it is pertinent to question why he chose to incorporate Loki into his origin story for Óðinn's steed.³¹⁴ The Master-Builder story has been identified as a common mythic story type.³¹⁵ The strategy by which the Loki character distracts the builder, however, seems unique to the Old Norse version of the story.³¹⁶

Loki's adoption of a female form is tactical in nature; as with Þórr disguising himself as Freyja, it represents an imaginative method of effecting a necessary objective

³¹³ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 34-6 and 'Hyndlolióð' 40.

³¹⁴ Simek (1993) 293.

³¹⁵ Harris (2008) 51-95.

³¹⁶ Rooth (1961) 35-41.

that appears initially unachievable. Loki's resulting pregnancy is in essence a side detail of the story; in contrast to the Rindr myth, for example, where the begetting of an heir is the justification for assuming a female form, here it is an unexpected, if useful, by-product of the subterfuge. The most obvious effect of Loki's pregnancy, from a narrative perspective, is to place special emphasis on the fundamental quality of his transformation into a female form. As the culmination of the story, Loki's pregnancy confirms the actual bodily reality of his female appearance; until this point, the transformation is ambiguous, and given Loki's reputation for deceit and trickery the reader might assume that he is using illusion to achieve his goal. Consequently, the deceiving of the giant is also on some level the deceiving of the reader, and the giant's realisation of his betrayal by Loki and the other gods is in some sense reflected in the moment that the reality of Loki's female form is confirmed to the reader.

Another interesting aspect to this story is that Loki's female form is not that of a human female, but rather a mare. The effect of this is to add a further complication to the reader's understanding of Loki's bodily reality. Bonnetain has argued that Loki's transformation into a different species compounds his sexual deviancy: he 'crossed both boundaries at the same time.'³¹⁷ The situation can, however, be read as more complex than that. Though shape-shifting is by no means a skill unique to Loki, he is nevertheless the most frequent and adept user of it;³¹⁸ to some extent his dynamic approach to physical form reflects the same bodily uncertainty as his mercurial approach to gender roles. One consequence of Loki's transformation into a mare is to problematise the extent to which his liaison with the stallion can be seen as bestiality, an action associated with the dishonourable ramifications of *ergi*.³¹⁹ Consequently, the whole shame dynamic is to some extent destabilised in this episode: the shame of Loki adopting a female role in sexual

³¹⁷ Bonnetain (2006) 328.

³¹⁸ Ellis Davidson (1964) 178.

³¹⁹ See Meißner (1935) 123 and von Schwerin (1935) 35.

congress with the stallion is balanced by his total physical transformation into a mare, thus asserting a normalised sexual practice between two creatures of the same species and the opposing gender. The animal body serves to hide Loki's anthropomorphic body, serving to obscure any questions that might be raised by Loki's hermaphroditic qualities: in assuming the form of a mare, Loki presents an uncomplicated female aspect. Had he, for example, assumed a humanoid female form with the intention of seducing the giant (whose sexual interest in divine females is already established by his desire for Freyja), the quality of the transformation would have been psychologically underscored by the broad physical similarities between a human male and a human female; the only distinctions between those two forms are the respective sexual organs, the very existence of which would call attention to Loki's *argr* status. The transformation from humanoid male to mare, however, is sufficiently exotic that it requires a complete change in fundamental shape: physical identifiers of sex are reduced in importance as a means of analysing the bodily figure because of the very significant difference between human and equine physiology. The shameful act of Loki's is consequently camouflaged, which makes it possible to view his intervention less as socially deviant behaviour and more as a 'redemptory act.'³²⁰

There is, therefore, perhaps an element of discernment in Loki's choice of form. In the extant mythology, it is noticeable that the gods who adopt a feminine identity are not shown to have alternatives: Þórr's female aspect is manifested exclusively in the Freyja-Þórr image, and whilst Óðinn cross-dresses in a number of sources he does not seem at any point to diversify his female transformation markedly from that of a *völva*; the Master-Builder tale lays emphasis on the variety with which Loki's female forms are presented, and demonstrates that they are limited by neither function nor species. Loki's creation of his own empowered female identity is thus not only more physically profound than that of the other two gods, but it is also more technically accomplished.

³²⁰ von Schnurbein (2000) 114.

To some extent the conception of Sleipnir, from a narrative perspective, echoes the anxieties concerning the status of his mother. It is important to remember that the symbol of the horse in Old Norse society appears to have carried a large number of magical and shamanic connotations.³²¹ In this regard, the fact that Sleipnir is depicted as Óðinn's stallion is highly pertinent, but the fact that the horse is also associated with Loki in a physical and intimate way suggests some cross-over in terms of their respective functions. Sleipnir's special quality is his ability to traverse between worlds, and thus by extension to grant whoever is riding him free passage between the worlds;³²² to some extent, this mirrors Loki's relative freedom of passage between worlds, but perhaps more significantly Sleipnir's mobility is a physical representation of Loki's function as an intermediary figure. Sleipnir's existence serves as a boon to Óðinn because it massively expands his field of influence through the worlds, apparently without any of the negative ramifications that are born out of associating with Loki, or indeed of engaging in dishonourable *argr* behaviour. In the previous sections concerning the procreative processes of Þórr and Óðinn (1.2.3 and 1.3.3), it was suggested that both of those gods emphasised child-creation as a political action, and one whereby the female, with the things she represents, was distanced from the act as much as possible; Loki's production of Sleipnir to some extent plays with this idea in a unique way. As suggested above, Sleipnir's conception does not seem to be the objective of Loki's sexual liaison but rather an unintended consequence thereof. From a gendered perspective, Loki is not, as the other two gods are arguably doing, dismissing or marginalising the female role in conception, but is instead taking it on himself – though, of course, this may also be seen as a form of marginalisation insofar as Loki's essential character and mentality remain standardly male, despite his current female physicality.

³²¹ See Jennbert (2011) 205-7 and Ellis Davidson (1964) 141-3.

³²² Sleipnir's ability to transport his rider between worlds is demonstrated in several texts, including 'Baldrs draumar' 2-3, *Gylfaginning* (2005) 46-7, and *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 20-1.

This is most noticeable in Snorri's consistent use of male pronouns for Loki throughout his account of this myth.

The fact that Loki's characteristic masculinity, which is to say that his default gender is universally assumed to be male, is unquestioned in any of the texts where he demonstrates female reproductive organs in a sense reflects Óðinn's magical seductions and rapes discussed previously (in 1.3.2.). Whilst Óðinn uses magic to penetrate women magically as a means of hijacking their sexual control and potential, Loki in a sense also represents a male force quite literally getting under a female skin for the purpose of self-empowerment, particularly in terms of controlling the outcomes and possibilities of a seduction situation. On the other hand, by directly (rather than remotely) controlling the female role in the sexual situation, Loki opens himself to the vulnerabilities of the female role; having used the sexual attractions of his mare form to seduce the stallion, Loki is subjected to a pregnancy that is either unwanted or, at the very least, unnecessary. Though he is empowered by his assumption of a female form, in terms of the influence it gives him over the giant's stallion, he assumes it to such an absolute degree that he becomes the victim of his own success.

The extent of Loki's lack of control over the situation can be seen in the manner in which Sleipnir is differentiated from his various half-siblings; whilst they are cast in either a position of neutrality or, more commonly, outright antagonism towards the Æsir, Sleipnir is the only figure that features as an ally independent of Loki's will. That this lone figure of support to the Æsir is the only named offspring of Loki's, in Snorri's version as well as our extant eddic poetry, to be produced by the god's maternal function is interesting; given Loki's eventual movement into outright conflict with the gods, and the prominent role played by some of his children at *ragnarök*, it is curious that Sleipnir seems entirely committed to supporting Óðinn's agenda. Through the procreative capabilities of his female form, Loki's characteristic powers and abilities (most notably, as mentioned above,

his function as an intermediary) are transferred to the next generation in a manner reminiscent of Þórr's children, and like Þórr's children Sleipnir does not seem to be beholden to maternal influence.³²³ In essence, by becoming a mother-figure, Loki has brought into the world an independent being who has the same abilities as he does, but over which he exercises little or no control; indeed, Sleipnir can be seen as running directly contrary to Loki's will, insofar as his long association with and subservience to Óðinn render him a valuable tool and ally to a figure who ultimately must face Loki on opposing sides of a battlefield.

The extant literature references a number of other offspring produced by Loki, all of which seem to have been conceived as a result of Loki playing the male role in sexual congress. Some of these children are obscure: very little, for example, is known about Váli or Narfi/Nari, Loki's sons by his wife Sigyn, beyond the brief role they play in the story of his binding.³²⁴ By far the most celebrated and prominent offspring he produces are those he fathers on the giantess Angrboða: the Fenrisúlfr, the Miðgarðsormr and the goddess Hel. Of particular interest is Snorri's assertion that the gods *þótti qllum mikils ills af væni, fyrst af móðerni ok enn verra af faðerni* 'all thought great evil might be expected from it, in the first place from the mother's side and yet worse from the father's side'.³²⁵ This particular comment of Snorri's is important for understanding the politicisation of the procreative process in Norse mythology. Like the other gods, Loki is genetically productive, but his offspring are of a 'radically different character'.³²⁶ Loki, moving into his phase as a force for universal destruction, begets three monsters of apocalyptic significance on a giantess whose name has been suggested to mean 'the one who brings grief'.³²⁷ Interestingly, the

³²³ For a discussion of Sleipnir's ability to move between worlds, and the use Óðinn makes of it, see Bonnetain (2007) 14-16.

³²⁴ Simek (1993) 228 & 348.

³²⁵ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 27.

³²⁶ Frakes (2002) 169.

³²⁷ Simek (1993) 16. Simek suggests this name may be a late invention.

giantess figure appears to function as something of a cipher in Snorri's description here; the character of the children, at least from the perspective of the Æsir, is most greatly influenced by the father's nature, a worldview that particularly reflects the portrayal of Þórr's children. The relationship between Loki and Angrboða is not well described, and it is possible that the giantess simply represents a convenient mythical female for Loki to father his eschatologically-significant progeny on; a single giantess representative of a large, non-Æsir community whose members are often cast in destructive roles.³²⁸

Angrboða's similarity to the matriarch of the Iron-wood in *Völuspá* 40, who is manifestly Óðinn's enemy, has lead some critics to view them as synonymous.³²⁹ Loki has made a deliberate choice, choosing as his sexual partner a figure who, it has been argued, is established in *Völuspá* as a direct and equal antagonist to Óðinn.³³⁰ Though Angrboða is a powerful and independent female, her relationship with Loki grants her the progeny that will accomplish the universal chaos and destruction she represents; Loki's approach involves a more rational choice, a conscious decision to go against the will of Óðinn, and can be viewed as a part of his act of judging and consequently dooming the Æsir. From a gendered perspective, Angrboða's sexual potential becomes a weapon for Loki to use against the Æsir.

If the various acts of mythological procreation referenced above can be seen as indicative of a wider dynamic of patriarchal politics that is evident in the text, then it provides a new potential layer to the understanding of *ragnarök*, and in particular Snorri's interpretation of it.³³¹ Whilst the scale of *ragnarök* is anticipated throughout the mythology as a whole, particularly in terms of allusions to the massed armies of the giants on one side and the combination of the Æsir, Vanir and *einherjar* on the other, Snorri's description

³²⁸ Mundal (2002) 187.

³²⁹ Lindow (1997) 46-7 and McKinnell (2013) 102. Mundal (2002) 192 argues that the matriarch is not only synonymous with Angrboða but also Gullveig.

³³⁰ Mundal (2002) 185-8.

³³¹ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 48-53.

quickly moves from a huge battlefield to a series of individual characters and their meetings. The prominent characters of this focused narrative are on one side Óðinn, Þórr and Víðarr, and on the other Loki, the Miðgarðsormr and the Fenrisúlfr.³³² For the most part, the climax of Snorri's description of *ragnarök* plays out the eschatological drama in the manner of a violent family dispute: the now irreconcilably divided blood-brothers contest each other, with their respective sons to hand.³³³ The politicisation of procreation within a patriarchal mindset reaches its most extreme point here: with female characters noticeably absent, Óðinn and Loki's sons are matched against each other in the active presence of their fathers, and it is in these terms that the end of the world is played out.

³³² Wanner (2012) 9-11 makes the interesting suggestion that Loki and his two sons are further connected in the *ragnarök* myth by the fact that all three suffer injuries to the mouth.

³³³ Wanner (2012) 17 suggests a similar idea, but substitutes Baldr for Víðarr; given Baldr's passive role in *ragnarök*, however, I feel that Víðarr makes a more suitable comparison to Loki's sons.

1.5 Conclusions

This section of the thesis has examined of the three most prominent gods represented in Norse mythological literature: Þórr, Óðinn and Loki. The analysis has attempted to ascertain three things: first, the extent to which these three gods can be seen as representative of different male roles within society; secondly, the ways in which they interact with female figures and to what extent these interactions are based on the male characters' own actions and preconceptions; thirdly, how the gods themselves adopt aspects of female power, and how their use of it reflects upon their understanding of female nature more generally. It can be seen that the three gods, though on a superficial level employing markedly different approaches to empowered females and female power, nevertheless express a remarkable consistency of intent across diverse mythological sources. A large part of this is evident in the ways in which all three gods actively work to change the ways in which the female figures they encounter can be defined, usually as a tactic to control or oppress them.

The juxtaposition of these gods' exploits can evidently inform our understanding of the mentality behind the creation of these literary products. The action of cross-dressing, for example, can be understood to function, in various ways, as a means of self-empowerment through which a male character can temporarily redefine himself into a female role as a means of accessing abilities that are not inherent to their original character, most notably the powers associated with *seiðr*.

Another observable topos relating these three gods is the male desire for the right of control over female sexual attributes, and the diverse methods by which this can be achieved in the literature. Despite the disparity between their individual actions there is nevertheless a consistent undercurrent of misogyny, suppression and denial to each god's

interaction with female characters; all three gods, in different ways, are engaged in the act of redefining the female figures around them as a means of obtaining power or influence.

As an extension of this argument, the act of procreation can be seen through the lens of inter-gender politics, and that whilst on a superficial level each god's procreative actions and results may seem distinct, they are unified through a recurrent theme of patriarchal political necessity. In consequence of this, each god, in his own individual way, can be seen to engage in a process of hijacking the procreative act, seizing the creative power of the female body under their own auspices, and thereby engendering new life as a means of accomplishing an objective.

In conclusion, in this section a number of prominent myths were subjected to new interpretations, both in terms of their individual accounts, but also through close juxtaposition with each other. By this means, it is apparent that whilst the male figures under discussion may be different in character and action, there is a remarkably consistent approach and worldview underlying their engagements with empowered female characters, and their own assumption of aspects of a female character. Keeping this consistent worldview in mind, the following section will examine in detail some of the most prominent empowered female figures of Norse mythology on their own terms.

Section 2: The Ásynjur

2.1. Introduction

This section will examine some of the most prominent members of the Ásynjur, the prominent goddesses of divine society who live alongside the three male figures described in the previous section. In keeping with the concept of social status within divine society, I will be dividing the Ásynjur into two different groupings: the ‘domestic’ and the ‘external’. In this context, the term ‘domestic’ refers to goddesses who appear to have been part of the society of the Æsir from its inception, such as Frigg and Iðunn. The section on ‘external’ goddesses will focus on the women whose incorporation into divine society is recounted in literary narratives, often ones that show such an integration to be a difficult and fraught process: Skaði, Gerðr, and Freyja.

This section will examine the ways in which these female figures are characterised by patriarchal society, but also how it can be seen that they negotiate both their function and power against a backdrop of male concerns, often to their own advantage. It will be shown that this frequently presents a tension between the men and women, and that the literature implicitly poses a distinction between the actual roles of women, and the roles of women as they are imagined by the male divinities of that mythological world. It will also be shown that the conflict of minds and wills between male and female figures can serve to create substantial dramatic and narrative tension, and that whilst some of these female figures are better than others at operating within a phallocentric social system, there is nevertheless a sense that these empowered women either resist the imposition of male labels or else use them to their own advantage.

2. 2. The ‘Domestic’ Ásynjur

2.2.1. Introduction

The term Ásynjur is a collective noun used to denote the various goddesses associated with the Æsir. As used by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*, it can denote both female figures who are implied to be originally part of the Æsir tribal grouping, such as Frigg, and also female figures who have joined the grouping at a later stage, such as the Vanir goddess Freyja.³³⁴ Snorri’s list is not exhaustive, and as well as incorporating a number of obscure characters it also misses out several prominent goddesses, such as Iðunn, Sif, and Skaði. Snorri’s list of the Ásynjur is interesting for other reasons as well, beyond its omissions. In the first instance, it immediately follows on from his much more expansive and detailed list of the male deities.³³⁵ The male figures that Snorri describes at length are well developed and represented in the extant literature, whereas in comparison many of the Ásynjur he lists are almost entirely unknown apart from the name, and indeed Snorri seems relatively uninterested in defining their roles beyond a token categorisation.³³⁶

Sjöfn, for example, is described thus: *hon gætir mjök til at snúa hugum manna til ásta, kvenna ok karla. Af hennar nafni er elskhuginn kallaðr sjafni* ‘she takes great pains to turn the minds of both women and men to love. It is from her name that love is called *sjafni*.’³³⁷ Apart from three uses of her name in skaldic kennings (where it is used to simply as a substitute for ‘woman’), this constitutes Sjöfn’s sole appearance in extant Old Norse literature.³³⁸ It is, consequently, difficult to understand what role, if any, she played in pre-Christian religion, and it would seem to be the case that she is of little importance to the writers and compilers of mythological literature, despite her potentially important function.

³³⁴ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 29-30. Snorri lists the Ásynjur as Frigg, Sága, Eir, Gefjon, Fulla, Freyja, Sjöfn, Lofn, Vár, Vör, Syn, Hlín, Snotra, Gná, Sól and Bil.

³³⁵ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 21-6.

³³⁶ Motz (1980) 170.

³³⁷ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 29.

³³⁸ Lindow (2001) 268.

Given that Sjöfn's situation is characteristic of many of the other figures contained on Snorri's list, the role and status of many of the goddesses is consequently ill defined. Snorri's mouthpiece for this list of the Ásynjur, and their subsequent descriptions, is Hár, in some sense a figure intended as a hypostasis of Óðinn, and his application of labels, such as the one above, to each individual goddess serves tellingly to reduce and relegate them to a narrow pigeonhole that is defined from a patriarchal perspective. The accuracy of Hár's labels is also debateable; whilst he chooses to categorise Eir, for example, as one of the Ásynjur, her nature and even existence beyond his narrative has been questioned.³³⁹ Ellis Davidson, for instance, argues that the scant evidence for Eir probably suggests she was a norn;³⁴⁰ Simek, alternatively, uses the same evidence to argue that she would more likely have been a valkyrie.³⁴¹ The fact that this evidence exists, however scant it may be, suggests that Eir did have some function, and thus some presence in the minds of pre-Christian heathens, but the literature as whole does not emphasise or explain her role in any meaningful way. Hár's classifications of the goddesses, furthermore, do not meaningfully accord with many of the qualities the deities actually display in the myths he recounts about them.³⁴² On the whole, according to Simek, we must simply accept that these 'not closer defined Asyniur... should probably be seen as female protective goddesses whose broader function is either unknown to or considered irrelevant to the compilers of this mythology.'³⁴³

Given this limited exposure of many of the Ásynjur, and also for reasons of space, this thesis will focus on the figures whose roles, characters and stories are treated in some detail: Frigg, Iðunn, Skaði, Gerðr, and Freyja.

³³⁹ Lindow (2001) 105.

³⁴⁰ Ellis Davidson (1998) 162-3.

³⁴¹ Simek (1993) 71-2.

³⁴² Motz (1980) 169.

³⁴³ Simek (1993) 274.

2.2.2. Frigg/Sága

Frigg is the first goddess mentioned in Snorri's list and is primarily known for her role as Óðinn's wife, a function which appears to be very ancient indeed.³⁴⁴ Despite her prominence, both in terms of her function and her social impact, there are relatively few sources that concern themselves with Frigg: the paucity of information concerning her has, rightly, been described as 'surprising.'³⁴⁵

Some scholars have argued that Frigg and Freyja may originally have been the same entity in pre-Christian thought.³⁴⁶ Whilst such investigations are of considerable interest and value, this present study will focus on the extant literary portrayal of the goddesses, and will distinguish between figures who are clearly portrayed as distinct from one another, and thus will analyse Frigg and Freyja as separate beings (Freyja will be examined in 2.4.). Other figures, however, are harder to separate in the literature: for example, the goddess Sága, who is the second goddess mentioned in the *Gylfaginning* catalogue of the Ásynjur, is an obscure figure, though one who is nevertheless referenced briefly in numerous pieces of literature.³⁴⁷ The only text in which her role is in any sense expanded upon is the following stanza from *Grímnismál*, where a disguised Óðinn says:

Sökkvabekkr heitir inn fjórði, en þar svalar knego
 unnir yfir glymia;
 þar þau Óðinn ok Sága drekka um alla daga,
 glöð, ór gullnom kerom.

[The fourth is called Sökkvabekkr, and there cool waves can roar over it; there every day Óðinn and Sága, gladsome, drink from golden cups.]³⁴⁸

³⁴⁴ Simek (1993) 94.

³⁴⁵ Jochens (1996) 65.

³⁴⁶ Ellis Davidson (1998) 10.

³⁴⁷ Simek (1993) 273-4.

³⁴⁸ 'Grímnismál' 7.

Óðinn's friendly engagement with this female figure, and the regularity of the domestic scene, have led many scholars to assume that Sága and Sökkvabekkr are synonymous with Frigg and her abode of Fensalir.³⁴⁹ If this is the case, and it seems likely that it is, then Snorri and the compilers of eddic poetry have, inadvertently or otherwise, engaged in a process of character separation. Though the figures of Frigg and Sága are very similar, there is nevertheless a subtle distinction in their characterisations. This is particularly noticeable in *Grímnismál* itself, which offers an interesting insight into Óðinn's married life, as Frigg, under her own name, also features in the prose prologue.³⁵⁰ If Sága is synonymous with Frigg, then the poem offers two subtly different versions of Óðinn's home life; as opposed to the scene of blissful domesticity that Óðinn describes concerning Sága, the prose prologue paints a noticeably cooler Frigg who, though by no means antagonistic, is nevertheless willing to engage her husband in bickering.

Importantly, these two portraits of Óðinn's domestic life associated with *Grímnismál* are delivered in two different contexts: the prose prologue describing Frigg is delivered by the narrative voice, whilst the description of Sága is delivered by Óðinn himself. This potentially demonstrates an element of imperfection in Óðinn's view of his own lifestyle: he paints the image of a cordial domestic existence which seems at odds with the scenario established by the prologue of the poem. He is shown to have a slightly skewed sense of his relationship to Frigg; either he believes that he and Frigg enjoy domestic bliss, or else he does not want a third party to be privy to the fact that their marriage is anything less than perfect. If one of Óðinn's overarching primary concerns is the close regulation, or outright control, of female figures within his expanded sphere of influence (discussed in 1.3.2.), then here the situation is presented in such a way as to

³⁴⁹ Lindow (2001) 265.

³⁵⁰ Simek (1993) 118-9 has argued that the prose prologue might be contemporary with the poem, though this view is not universally accepted; regardless, there is nothing to suggest that the compiler of the prologue makes a distinction between Sága and Frigg, given that he portrays Frigg in a similar position of domestic intimacy to Óðinn as Sága occupies in the poem.

destabilise his closest female relationship. Frigg is presented as independent of will, and entirely willing to challenge her husband: his failure to bend her entirely to his will, or to perceive that she has such a degree of independence, reflects poorly on his characteristic enactment of patriarchal principles.

Glimpses of Óðinn and Frigg's married life appear in other texts as well, and build up to form a relatively consistent picture. The opening conceit of *Vafþrúðnismál*, for example, in many ways parallels the prose prologue to *Grímnismál*.³⁵¹ In this passage, Óðinn announces his intention to journey into enemy territory in order to enter into a life threatening wisdom contest with the giant Vafþrúðnir; Frigg's initial strategy is an attempt to persuade her husband to remain at home, and when this proves ineffective she bids him goodbye with a stern warning to be careful. Once again the dynamics of the relationship revealed here are subtle but cleverly constructed: Frigg is not in any sense antagonistic towards her husband, but it is clear that neither party quite sees eye-to-eye. Just as Frigg is unable to dissuade Óðinn from the endeavour, so too does he fail to obtain any aid from her; the brusqueness of her farewell to him serves to divorce her from the action of the poem, and indeed she is never referenced again:

‘Heill þú farir! heill þú aptr komir!

heill þú á sinnom sér!

æði ér dugi, hvars þú skalt, Aldaföðr,

orðom mæla iqtun!’

[‘Travel safe! Come back safe! Be safe on the way! May your mind suffice you,

Father-of-Generations, wherever you have to speak to the giant with words!’]³⁵²

This stanza can be read in several ways; it has, for example, been taken as a form of hearty encouragement from a wife to her husband.³⁵³ Given the context, however, this reading

³⁵¹ ‘Vafþrúðnismál’ 1-4. For a discussion of the thematic and stylistic similarities between the texts, see Ruggerini (1994).

³⁵² ‘Vafþrúðnismál’ 4.

cannot be taken unconditionally; following as it does from Óðinn's refusal to heed her warning, the emphatic and terse nature of her stanza would more probably suggest irritation. It is a scenario of social comedy instantly recognizable to the modern world: a wife is acknowledging that if her husband must engage in a silly endeavour, she will have no part in it.

Her irritation, indeed, seems all the more likely given the nature of Óðinn's response to her initial request for him not to go:

‘Fiold ek fór, fiold ek freistaða,
fiold ek reynda regin:
hitt vil ek vita, hvé Vafþrúðnis
salakynni sé!’

[‘Much I have travelled, much I have tried, much I have tested the powers: but I want to know this, what Vafþrúðnir's dwelling is like!’]³⁵⁴

Óðinn's reply to Frigg's assertion that the giant is too formidable an opponent for her husband, and to her counsel that he should avoid the confrontation, is not really an answer at all: the stanza makes no direct reference either to Frigg's concern about the giant's strength, or to her advice to stay at home. Frigg is linguistically marginalised by this speech act, the impetus of which seems to be to reduce her to the status of voiceless spectator. Her parting shot of ‘*æði ér dugi, hvars þú skalt, Aldaföðr, orðom mæla iqtun!*’ can consequently be seen as a manifestation of wifely pique, an ironic observation that implies that she might want to see Óðinn bite off more than he can chew, if only to teach him a lesson. Emphasis is also laid on the unusual name of *Aldaföðr* ‘Father-of-Generations’, for which Zoëga gives the definition of ‘Patriarch’.³⁵⁵ The dynamics of the gender politics are subtle but clear: if Óðinn is not going to heed her advice, and is intent

³⁵³ This, for example, is the reading offered by Orchard in his recent translation. See Orchard (2011) 277.

³⁵⁴ ‘Vafþrúðnismál’ 3.

³⁵⁵ Zoëga (2004) 7.

on acting like the patriarch he is, then she will no longer involve herself in the process.

Óðinn is consequently rendered an isolated figure, rejected by the only friendly/allied figure presented in the poem, and deprived of whatever she might give.

With regard to Frigg's powers, as well as her role of queen amongst the gods, Snorri attributes to Frigg a function similar to that of the foresight of the *völur*: *veit hon ørløg manna þótt hon segi eigi spár* 'she knows the fates of men, though she does not make any prophecy.'³⁵⁶ This is another aspect of her character that increases the likelihood of her positive identification as *Sága*, whose name probably means 'seeress'.³⁵⁷ Whilst there are passing references to other goddesses possessing the ability to see the future, of all the *Ásynjur* it is Frigg who is most closely associated with prophetic visions; since she is the most senior female figure in divine society, it is understandable that she would be most closely associated with this specifically female and potent form of supernatural power.³⁵⁸ The *Ásynjur*, with Frigg as their sibyl-in-chief, form an antithetical image to that of the *völur*; whereas the *völur* are the remote, alien and hostile purveyors of future knowledge who can be forced or bribed to reveal what they see, the *Ásynjur* represent the domestic, familiar and friendly figures who nevertheless seem consistently unwavering in their refusal or inability to share their foreknowledge with their male kin (the *völur* will be discussed in 3.4.). Frigg is also in some sense a reflection of her husband, but unlike him she does not attempt to 'exploit' the gift of prophecy.³⁵⁹

Frigg's prophetic function potentially throws new light on her actions in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grímnismál*. Given that Óðinn's manifest intent in *Vafþrúðnismál* is to seek out Vafþrúðnir for the purpose of acquiring knowledge, the obvious question of why he has not sought information from his wife is raised. On one level, Óðinn's characteristic

³⁵⁶ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 21.

³⁵⁷ Orchard (1997) 136.

³⁵⁸ Ellis Davidson (1998) 121.

³⁵⁹ Jochens (1996) 65.

pursuit of wisdom is being examined through the juxtaposition of two opposing sources of it, which are respectively the domestic but inaccessible Frigg and the distant and dangerous but accessible Vafþrúðnir. It was previously argued that Óðinn's agenda concerning concepts of female power was one that consistently showed that merely having 'allied' female power was not enough (1.3.3.); that within Óðinn's worldview female concepts of power must be assumed by the male figure, taken under his personal authority and used by him directly in order to have most effect. This can be seen here: Frigg does in fact offer some element of her power, insofar as she warns Óðinn against his mission. Bek-Pedersen has even argued that her reticence is a careful attempt to prevent her prophecies from coming to pass, by giving them a careful wording.³⁶⁰ The issue is that Óðinn is receiving the benefit of his wife's wisdom, but does so through the medium of her discretion: she gives wisdom without knowledge, advice without substantiation. The implication, consequently, is that this is an intolerable situation for Óðinn; it is better to journey into enemy territory in order to obtain direct knowledge to hold at his personal disposal than to accept his wife's individual, if allied, control over such knowledge. In consequence of this, Frigg's apparent irritation is even more understandable; she has attempted to aid her husband, and his objection is that she is doing so on her own terms, and not his. It has been argued that Old Norse literature in general often offers a juxtaposition between the 'man who does' and the 'woman who knows';³⁶¹ in the case of these two figures, the comparison is made all the more jarring by their status as a married unit.

The prose prologue to *Grímnismál* utilises a variation on the theme recounted above. Once again, Frigg offers her perspective on a subject and is studiously resisted by her husband. In order, we must presume, to teach her husband a lesson, she not only engages in a wager from which she will profit, but also cheats to ensure that her version of

³⁶⁰ Bek-Pedersen (2011) 57.

³⁶¹ Scott (2002) 227.

the future will be the one to play out. In actual fact, her foresight is not entirely accurate: King Geirröðr does not actually torture people who ask for food, but rather has been primed to attack a man whom no dog would assault. In essence, Frigg is playing upon her expectations of Óðinn, most notably in her anticipation of his use of disguise, to create the illusion that her version of the future is the correct one. Óðinn, noticeably, is implied to have fallen for the illusion completely, as his pronouncements against both Geirröðr and Agnarr concern their failure, or otherwise, to give him expected hospitality.³⁶² The prologue thus colours an audience's entire understanding of the work. As the poem progresses and Óðinn unveils his immense wisdom and knowledge with a fierce dignity that culminates in the revelation (and subsequent liberation) of the god in all his terrifying majesty and power, there is nevertheless a sense that this image of the Terrible One has been sabotaged right from the beginning: it is entirely through the machinations of Frigg that he finds himself in this embarrassing and entirely unnecessary position. There is a sense that he is unwittingly the butt of a joke, the sovereign of the gods just as much undone by Frigg's actions as the human king before him. Frigg emerges, ultimately, as the most powerful and influential figure of the poem, despite the brevity of her appearance. Óðinn may possess knowledge, and the ability to discourse on it at length, but it is abstract in a way that Frigg's is not. She may only make one pronouncement on the nature of the future (even if it is one that she has to fix herself), but it is also the only pronouncement which is pertinent to the story of the poem. In this regard, Óðinn has been made a fool of, a situation enforced by the fact that he does not recognize the trick his wife has played, even by the end of the poem. In his dismissiveness of his wife, and by consequently rendering her a marginal figure in his own little adventure, Óðinn has in fact given Frigg the opportunity to work independently and exercise her power over him. Although both poems considered here deal with the theme of Frigg's powers only briefly, it is clear that a

³⁶² 'Grímnismál' 2.

premium is placed upon them, and that they are, furthermore, inaccessible to Óðinn unless they are mediated by her active involvement in his affairs.

The brevity of these portraits of domestic life are characteristic both of Óðinn and Frigg's relationship, and of the pattern of the relationship between married male and female deities in Old Norse mythological literature more generally. There are numerous stories that recount the acquisition, or reclaiming, of a bride, but few that treat at length the domestic life of the gods and goddesses when they are together. It is necessary, therefore, to see if a coherent picture of Óðinn and Frigg's domestic life can be pieced together from these limited sources, and to assess whether there are in fact allusions to the instability of their marriage.

One aspect is Frigg's fidelity. As discussed previously, the literature revels in Óðinn's extra-marital affairs, which raises the question of whether Frigg is similarly unfaithful. In *Lokasenna*, Loki makes the following accusation against Frigg:

‘Þegi þú, Frigg! þú ert Fiörgyns mær
ok hefir æ vergiðr verit,
er þá Véa ok Vilia létstu þér, Viðris kvæn,
báða í baðm um tekit.’

[‘Shut up, Frigg! You are Fiörgyn's daughter and you have always been man-mad, since you, wife of Viðrir (Óðinn), took both Vé and Vili in your embrace.’]³⁶³

This reflects a fleeting reference in *Ynglinga saga* that suggests the same story, or a similar one:

Þat var eitt sinn, þá er Óðinn var farinn langt í brot ok hafði lengi dvalzk, at Ásum þótti ørvænt hans heim. Þá tóku bræðr hans at skipta arfi hans, en konu hans, Frigg, gengu þeir báðir at eiga. En litlu síðar kom Óðinn heim. Tók hann þá við konu sinni.

³⁶³ ‘Lokasenna’ 26.

[It so happened once, when Óðinn had gone far abroad and had been away for a long time, that the Æsir thought his return was past hope. Then his brothers began to divide up his estate, and they both married his wife Frigg. But a little later Óðinn came home; then he took his wife back.]³⁶⁴

The idea of Frigg committing adultery with Óðinn's brothers, potentially simultaneously, may then be a well understood idea.

Loki in *Lokasenna* intends the comment as a straight insult, encapsulating both Frigg's wantonness and Óðinn's inability to police her behaviour, but it does raise several interesting possibilities. Frigg is presented as a sexualised figure who demonstrates an element of discernment in her choice of sexual partner; she has not, as many of the goddesses in the poem are alleged to have done, had sex with Loki, but rather with her husband's brothers. The familial tie is important; not only is Frigg attracting sexual partners of the highest social class, a means in itself of safeguarding her position at the top of society, but it demonstrates her influence over the entire family. Óðinn, it will be recalled (as discussed in 1.3.2.), boasted in *Hárbarðsljóð* of his seduction of a whole family of sisters; his sexual prowess is implicitly attested by this 'victory' over an entire familial unit.³⁶⁵ In this reversed case, Frigg is shown to have won influence over a triumvirate of brothers.

The practical effect of this, in the fleeting reference this situation receives in *Ynglinga saga*, is to allow Frigg's royal power to be undiminished, even in her husband's absence: following Óðinn's mysterious and prolonged disappearance, Vé and Vili choose to divide his kingdom between themselves, but share access to Frigg, whom they both take to wife. When Óðinn returns, he takes back both his kingdom and his wife. During this turbulent period for the fledgling country, even if it is depicted in brief, Frigg functions as

³⁶⁴ *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 12.

³⁶⁵ 'Hárbarðsljóð' 18.

the only fixed and unchanging point: though boundaries and leaders are in flux, she remains the sole and constant queen of the whole nation. One possible reading of this situation is that the queen can be seen to be, in effect, an asset which must be taken possession of to legitimise the new regime; this would reflect a conspicuous real-world practice, though it is highly unusual for a queen to be shared by two husbands. The idea that Frigg is in fact empowered by her sexual relationships would seem to be evident, given the unusualness of the situation in *Ynglinga saga*; if Snorri is basing this description on *Lokasenna* 26, then he is rendering the affair in acutely political terms, and in such a way as to show that Frigg is adept at maintaining her social standing regardless of adverse circumstances, and uses her sexual appeal to support her own powerbase. The effect of these two brief references is to suggest that Frigg is, in many ways, a mirror of her husband: a sexually confident being who is adept at manipulating the sexual desires of the opposite gender for personal gain, and by implication personal enjoyment.

Frigg's use of her sexual allure is also depicted, although in a very different manner, in the *Gesta Danorum*. Saxo relates an event where a gold image of Óðinn, newly and falsely recognized as a god, is created by his neophyte worshipers, and which Frigg immediately covets:

At nihilominus Frigga, cultus sui nitorem divinis mariti honoribus anteponens, uni familiarium se stupro subiecit; cuius ingenio simulacrum demolita aurum publicae superstitioni consecratum ad privati luxus instrumentum convertit. Nec pensi duxit impudicitiam sectari, quo promptius avaritia frueretur, indigna femina, quae numinis coniugio potiretur. Hoc loci quid aliud adiecerim quam tale numen hac coniuge dignum exstitisse? [...] Igitur Othinus, gemina uxoris iniuria laceratus, haud levius imaginis suae quam tori læsione dolebat. Duplici itaque ruboris

irritamento perstrictus plenum ingenui pudoris exsilium carpsit eoque se contracti dedecoris sordes aboliturum putavit.

[But still Frigg gave preference to the splendour of her own apparel to her husband's divine honours, and submitted herself to the lust of one of her servants; by this man's cunning the idol was broken down, and the gold which had been devoted to public idolatry was turned to the service of her personal wantonness. She thought little of practising unchastity, that she might quicker satisfy her covetousness, this woman unworthy to be the consort of a god; but need I add anything, save that such a god was worthy of such a wife? [...] Thus Óðinn, wounded by both of his wife's trespasses, resented the damage to his idol as heavily as that to his bed. Stung by these two embarrassments, he took to an exile overflowing with justified shame, thinking thereby to erase the stain of his shame.]³⁶⁶

Frigg's relationship with her husband is being portrayed in a very different light from that found in eddic literature, although they are connected by a shared interest in her adulteries. This is, in part, a facet of Saxo's recognized antipathy towards the *Æsir*.³⁶⁷ According to Jesch, furthermore, Saxo, 'like many a churchman... saw only one possible role for women, that of a sexual being.'³⁶⁸ If this is the case, then Frigg represents the opposite characterisation of female sexuality to Rindr in Saxo's account: whilst Óðinn was able to use the latter's sexual function to his own advantage, here Frigg's promiscuity is something that damages him (see 1.3.3.). The reason for Saxo's focus on the negative aspects of Frigg's sexuality is transparent: her dreadfulness is used by him as proof of her husband's lack of divinity. From a patriarchal standpoint, the effect is to undermine Óðinn by demonstrating that his spouse, the closest empowered female to him, is not only

³⁶⁶ Saxo Grammaticus (1931) 25.

³⁶⁷ McKinnell (2005) 42-3.

³⁶⁸ Jesch (1991) 178.

actively insubordinate to his authority, but also entirely willing to sacrifice his reputation for personal gain. Óðinn does not, furthermore, possess the ability to stop her, nor does he exercise the exclusive right of sexual access to her body.

The power dynamic that Saxo portrays is clear: the greater Frigg's power and level of self-governance, the more enfeebled Óðinn becomes. In order to undermine the image of the god-king, Saxo equips him with the figure of an anti-queen, a figure whose role is to undermine and attack the seat of authority from a position of vulnerability created by her proximity to the king. Intentionally or otherwise, Saxo himself in fact create a very potent empowered female image here: Frigg's freedom of thought and ability to dictate her sexual partners denotes a figure who, in openly demonstrating these qualities, is formidable enough to destroy the illusion of Óðinn's power to such an extent that he is driven into exile. Óðinn is demonstrably powerless to resist; his patriarchal social hierarchy is fundamentally disrupted by female independence. If, as seems likely, Saxo is interpreting an old tradition that laid emphasis on Frigg's propensity for extra-marital sex, then he is adapting it in such a way as to demonstrate that the patriarchal system cannot sustain itself long in the face of a female who is willing to turn her sexual independence to her own advantage. Like Snorri, Saxo renders Frigg's adultery as a highly political action: she is placed in a position of power by Óðinn when he makes her his queen, but once she is in that position she has the ability to resist functioning as social convention dictates that she ought to, and through her independence can cause great damage to her husband's rule. The implication of this situation is that the Æsir are to some extent justified in their anxious need to police the sexuality of their women-folk: if even a figure as senior as Óðinn can be driven into exile by the non-compliance of a single woman, then it raises uncomfortable questions about the viability of the whole social structure which he represents.

Another interesting facet of the brief insights the literature offers into the married life of Óðinn and Frigg is the pronounced fact of their separate habitations: Valhöll and

Fensalir. On one level, it is fitting that the Frigg should have an abode of her own that is separate from her husband's hall; as the highest ranking goddess, her ownership of personal property adds to the dignity of her social position, and consequently puts her on an equal footing, in terms of ownership, with Freyja, whose private domain is referenced on several occasions and which seems to have had an important religious function.³⁶⁹ On another level, however, it serves to create a sense of physical distance between husband and wife. The existence of Fensalir as a separate realm often serves to divorce Frigg from the pivotal events of Norse cosmic history, such as in *Völuspá*:

‘Þó hann æva hendr né hofuð kembði,

aðr á bál um bar Baldrs andskota;

en Frigg um grét í Fenslóm

vá Valhallar - vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?’

[‘But (Váli) did not wash his hands or comb his hair until he carried on to the pyre Baldr's enemy; but Frigg, in Fensalir, bewailed the misery of Valhöll – would you know more, or what?']³⁷⁰

In ascribing Frigg a physical location that is clearly separate from Valhöll, the poet emphasises the degree to which Frigg is removed from the action: she is, in a sense, materially divorced from the world that matters, the place in which events of eschatological importance are occurring. This reading is further suggested by the juxtaposition between the two figures of Váli and Frigg; one is a dynamic and active figure existing within the limits of Valhöll, who acts to address the situation, the other is a static and impotent figure whose role is to lament the situation at a distance.³⁷¹ The focus on the

³⁶⁹ Simek (1993) 87.

³⁷⁰ ‘Völuspá’ 33.

³⁷¹ Ellis Davidson (1998) 169-70 suggests that Frigg is fulfilling an important role by weeping at home, an action she contrasts with Freyja's similar weeping for her lover Óðr. This reading is viable, but is not mutually exclusive with my own.

two separate habitations underscores the differing gender roles: whatever Frigg's powers may be, she is unable or unwilling to use them with the male-orientated world of Valhöll.

This is particularly underscored by the fact Frigg is demonstrably powerful: prior to Baldr's death, she is able to extract an oath from almost every object in creation not to hurt her son.³⁷² This is a universal degree of power that no other god, including her husband, ever matches.³⁷³ It is also important that Baldr is killed in his father's court: the one weakness in Frigg's overwhelming maternal and female power of protection manifests itself in Valhöll, the seat of divine patriarchy and her husband's territory. In Snorri's account of this myth, Frigg is a physical presence in Valhöll – it is she who takes charge in the immediate aftermath of Baldr's death, requesting a volunteer to act on her behalf.³⁷⁴ This in itself is telling: whereas before, Frigg, journeying forth from her own hall of Fensalir, is by herself able to extract an oath from every object in the world, once she is located in Valhöll she is reliant on a male envoy to be effective. The subtle implication is that her power or agency are affected by the territory she inhabits: in the male world of Valhöll she is diminished and impotent.

Though Fensalir is not mentioned by name, it is implicitly referenced at a later point in *Völuspá*, where Óðinn's fall in combat at *ragnarök* is described in terms of Frigg's grief over the event.³⁷⁵ This reference echoes the earlier one concerning Baldr, and again emphasises Frigg's absence from moments of cosmic importance: even in the final battle that will decide the fate of the worlds she is not an active participant. Even if, in view of her powers of prophecy, she is aware of the futility of the gods' final struggle, she is taking no active part in it despite the fact that it has a clear emotional impact on her. In the section

³⁷² As Lindow (1997) 49 notes, this is particularly unusual given that it is Ullr who is characteristically associated with oath-taking.

³⁷³ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 45. The implications of Frigg's fatal overlooking of the mistletoe are discussed in Kaplan (2012) 37-9.

³⁷⁴ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 46.

³⁷⁵ 'Völuspá' 53.

on Loki's offspring (1.4.3.), it was argued that Snorri's portrayal of *ragnarök* focuses on the conflict between Óðinn and Loki's families; the absence of a figure as powerful, and as intimately connected to the feud, as Frigg suggests some kind of literary tension concerning her power, and Óðinn's access to it. It is true that no other females are connected with the battle at *ragnarök*, making Frigg's absence appropriate, but it is also true that the extant literature does not lay much emphasis on the other goddesses' absence: Frigg's lack of presence at *ragnarök*, and the degree to which Fensalir is physically separate from the battlefield, is given unique focus. Within the literary context, Fensalir can be argued to function as a means of clearly suggesting a physical demarcation separating Frigg from Óðinn, and consequently their inability to affect one another.

The function of Fensalir, and what it represents, is unclear. It has been suggested that the name means 'marsh halls'.³⁷⁶ If this is the case, it is another factor that supports the identification of Sága with Frigg, as Sága's hall of Sökkvabekkr, with the meaning of 'sunken bank', has similar connotations.³⁷⁷ Beyond a certain natural symbolic affinity between women and water, Frigg's association with watery abodes is hard to understand; Lindow summarises the scholarly uncertainty concerning Fensalir by saying: 'I have no idea why Frigg should live in a boggy place, despite the old argument that there is an association with a cult situated at a spring.'³⁷⁸

I suggest that the characterisation of Fensalir as a boggy or marshy location serves in fact to provide a physical antithesis to Valhöll. Physical descriptions of Óðinn's domain tend to be brief, with a focus on certain key aspects, such as the shield motif of its walls. Certain features, however, convey a suggestion of physical height. It is, for example, described by Snorri as a *háva holl*, *svá at varla mátti hann sjá yfir hana* 'high hall, so that

³⁷⁶ Simek (1993) 81.

³⁷⁷ Simek (1993) 297.

³⁷⁸ Lindow (2002) 114.

[Gylfi] could barely see over it'.³⁷⁹ The height of Valhöll is also implied by the special property of Óðinn's throne of Hliðskjálf, if it can be understood to be situated in Valhöll, which, *er Alfǫðr sitr í því sæti þá sér hann of alla heima* 'when All-Father sits in that seat, then he can see over all worlds'.³⁸⁰ This property of Hliðskjálf is attested in a number of different sources.³⁸¹ Even if Hliðskjálf is not located in Valhöll itself, it is nevertheless a place dedicated to Óðinn which is associated with a sense of height. Though these are fleeting references to the high aspect of Óðinn's abode and throne, they do nevertheless suggest a consistent understanding of their physical situation as a place of high elevation.

There is, in consequence, an implied opposition between the geographies of Valhöll and Fensalir; the latter, with its associations of bogs and river banks, would not be expected to be found at high elevation. One hall is high and vertiginous, the other low and close to the water table. In some sense, this situation may be seen to parallel the much more developed scenario concerning the habitations of Njörðr and Skaði, whose marriage is an unhappy one lived in separation due to their conflicting emotional needs for habitation close to the sea and in the mountains respectively;³⁸² whilst the gender/landscape associations are reversed in that myth, a characteristic of mythic episodes dealing with Skaði (which will be explored in 2.3.3.), it is possible to read their situation as a mirror of that of Óðinn and Frigg.³⁸³ In much the same way as it has been argued that the juxtaposition of mountain and sea highlight Njörðr and Skaði's basic incompatibility, so too can a sense of incompatibility be seen in the domestic arrangements of Óðinn and Frigg.³⁸⁴ Scholars have noted that the gods have a tendency to form sexual alliances with individuals belonging to groups with whom they have fundamental hostility, usually

³⁷⁹ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 7.

³⁸⁰ *Gylfaginning* 20.

³⁸¹ See Simek (1993) 152 for a list of these.

³⁸² *Gylfaginning* (2005) 23-4.

³⁸³ Skaði's journey to find vengeance has been argued to be a burlesque of the standard bridal-quest, with the female figure adopting the traditionally male role. See Clunies Ross (1994a) 119 and McKinnell (2005) 64.

³⁸⁴ McKinnell (2005) 63.

giantesses:³⁸⁵ it may be possible, however, to read in the relationship between Óðinn and Frigg the possibility of divine misalliance even within a single social grouping. If this is the case, then the existence of separate habitations helps to explain the sense of disconnection between Óðinn and Frigg in terms of their power relationship: much as the fundamental nature of their abodes are mutually exclusive, so too are the powers to which they have access. In much the same way as they are unwilling or unable to live together, and the latter seems a more likely reading, so too are they unable to function together perfectly as an empowered unit.

The only episode of Frigg's life which is treated in substantial detail concerns her involvement in the myth of the death of her son Baldr. This is, furthermore, the myth that portrays Frigg at her most active, and gives some more insight into the relationship between Frigg and the rest of divine society.³⁸⁶ Though it is alluded to in numerous other mythical sources and recounted in dramatically different style in the *Gesta Danorum*, our main source of information for the myth is Snorri.³⁸⁷ Baldr's prophetic dreams concerning his demise are greeted with distress by the assembled gods, but it is Frigg who takes the active role in attempting to prevent this occurrence. Frigg's only independent adventure, and in which she demonstrates great power, casts her firmly in the role of a mother figure, rather than a wife.

It has been argued that one of the reasons that Frigg may be perceived to be so powerful in this particular myth may be that her action is related to, and indeed can be seen as an extension of, her maternal function.³⁸⁸ She has been described as 'the only affective mother' in the mythological world, an isolating factor that highlights the extent to which

³⁸⁵ McKinnell (2005) 62.

³⁸⁶ This is matched by a strong mutual association between Frigg and the concept of childbirth; see Jochens (1996) 65-6.

³⁸⁷ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 45-8.

³⁸⁸ Bek-Pedersen (2006) 97.

she fulfils the role.³⁸⁹ The dual role of the mother is to bring life into the world, and then to protect and nurture that life: in arranging for her son's functional immortality, Frigg is taking the maternal function to its most extreme form. The political dynamics of the divine world's most aristocratic family are also important at this point: Baldr is not only her son, but the legitimate heir to Óðinn's sovereignty over the gods. As a queen figure in the Nordic tradition, Frigg's body and power not only nurture the prince, but serve to legitimise him: that he is worthy of her protection confirms his status as Óðinn's heir.³⁹⁰ His preservation thus represents the protection of the royal seed and the hope of dynasty; in this instance, the preservation of Baldr is the only safeguard against *ragnarök*. Frigg's power of preservation is thus not only employed in the protection of her son, but also in the protection of the stability of the world as a whole and of the patriarchal social system represented by her husband. In essence, Frigg at her most powerful is seen acting as the perfect aristocratic wife; she is the paragon of noble wives, and has more freedom of action than any male figure in that situation.³⁹¹

The authority of Frigg as a queen figure is addressed by Snorri in other subtle ways, the effect of which is to construct a sense of her importance within the male sphere of her husband's society. This is particularly noticeable in the events immediately following Baldr's slaying, which Snorri describes thus:

Þá er Baldr var fallinn þá fellusk öllum Ásum orðtók ok svá hendr at taka til hans, ok sá hverr til annars, ok váru allir með einum hug til þess er unnit hafði verkit. En engi mátti hefna, þar var svá mikill griðastaðr. En þá er Æsirnir freistuðu at mæla þá var hitt þó fyrr at grátrinn kom upp svá at engi mátti qðrum segja með orðunum frá sínum harmi. En Óðinn bar þeim mun verst þenna skaða sem hann kunni mesta

³⁸⁹ Jochens (1996) 65-6.

³⁹⁰ Larrington (2009) 511-16. Larrington is in fact discussing the presentation of human queens in various saga genres, but her arguments are just as valid when applied to Frigg.

³⁹¹ Lindow (1997) 41.

skyn hversu mikil aftaka ok missa Ásunum var í fráfalli Baldrs. En er goðin vitkuðusk þá mælir Frigg ok spurði hverr sá væri með Ásum er eignask vildi allar ástir hennar ok hylli ok vili hann ríða á Helveg ok freista ef hann fái fundit Baldr ok bjóða Helju útlausn ef hon vill láta fara Baldr heim í Ásgarði.

[When Baldr had fallen all the Æsir's words failed them, and so did their hands for taking him up, and everyone looked at one another and all were of one thought concerning the one who had done this. But no one could take vengeance, because it was so great a place of sanctuary there. But when the Æsir tried to speak, it happened instead that wailing came up so that no one could speak in words to the others about his grief. But Óðinn took this injury most to heart as he had the greatest sense of how great a deprivation and loss there was to the Æsir in the death of Baldr. And when the gods recovered their senses Frigg spoke and inquired who there was amongst the Æsir who wished to have all her love and favour, and was willing to ride the Hel-road and see whether he could find Baldr, and offer Hel a ransom if she would let Baldr go back home to Ásgarðr.]³⁹²

There is a great deal of information that can be teased out of this brief passage. It has been noted that Frigg is here adopting a quasi-legal function; indeed, Snorri's account of the myth seems rich in legal and political detail at this point.³⁹³ At a moment when society has been dealt a great injury, Frigg works within that society's framework in order to heal it. The juxtaposition between a single female figure and the assembled male-dominated group that surround her is clearly established through the medium of speech. In the aftermath of the calamity the gods are rendered mute, incapable of responding to the event they have witnessed. It is also clear that they are rendered impotent: though Höðr, as Loki's instrument, falls within in their collective ire, they are unable to act due to the social

³⁹² *Gylfaginning* (2005) 46.

³⁹³ Kaplan (2012) 40.

restrictions placed on Valhöll. These two factors portray the Æsir as conscious beings possessing a definite will, in terms of their desire to do violence upon Höðr, but they are disempowered entirely: not only are they unable to act, but they are even unable to give voice to their distress. It represents the fundamental breakdown of masculine power and authority within the male realm of Valhöll. As if to emphasise this, Snorri gives us an unusual and highly uncharacteristic insight into Óðinn's emotional turbulence; the severity of the disaster is underscored by Snorri's temporary suspension of Óðinn's inscrutability. Like the other gods, he too is rendered unable to speak, a fact which Snorri draws attention to by his third person narration of Óðinn's thoughts. Not only is Óðinn unable to resist the general enfeeblement that has struck the assembled gods, but according to Snorri he has suffered the worst effect of it: the power and authority of his status as a male ruler, in the hall which marks the centre of his society, is broken, and masculine power is shown to be ineffective and impotent.

The first speech act, consequently, is given to Frigg, and it is very noticeable that she, and not her husband, takes charge of the situation; as if to emphasise the enfeeblement of masculine power, she chooses to invoke her power and her grace in obtaining aid.³⁹⁴ Whilst it is a very different form of action from the Æsir's desired assault on Höðr, it is nevertheless the first action that is undertaken in the aftermath of Baldr's death, and it is portrayed entirely in female terms of reference, something made clear by the recasting of the sentiment of antagonism from Höðr to the female figure of Hel. Jochens has argued that Hel's taking of Baldr represents 'a caricature of the normal marriage pattern';³⁹⁵ if this is the case, then Frigg herself can be seen to be engaging in the act of creating an empowered female identity. Her action is one that tries to recast Hel from the role of

³⁹⁴ Lindow (1997) 101 suggests that Frigg's words also carry an implicit offer of sexual availability to anyone who aids her - if such a reading is accurate, then it demonstrates that Frigg is able to use her sexuality to get what she wants even when her desire is to support society, rather than to subvert it.

³⁹⁵ Jochens (1996) 65.

potential-bride into outright antagonist, and one who, unlike Höðr, can be approached.³⁹⁶

In terms of the power dynamics of the situation, the masculine prerogative for vengeance has been sidelined and effaced by a new dichotomy that portrays two differing kinds of specifically female power: Frigg's desire to resurrect her son, which is an extension of the maternal power and function she portrayed in establishing his near-invulnerability, and the retentive sovereign right of Hel.

The overall implication seems to be that whilst male power, and notably also kingly power, fail when they have no means of addressing a situation, it is possible for female power to assert itself in the midst of male territory. For all that male characters try to impose a set definition on Frigg, she is not beholden to it and once patriarchal society is paralysed she is able to continue to wield her power effectively; this is not to say that in this instance she is working against patriarchal power as an opponent, but rather that she is in a position to operate outside its limits.

As a means of concluding this section on Frigg, it would be appropriate to sum up the evidence given above, and consequently suggest some ways in which Frigg is portrayed as an empowered being. Frigg is not, as Motz has argued, an 'ineffectual' figure;³⁹⁷ she is, undeniably, a powerful figure who possesses a strong degree of mastery over a number of female-associated supernatural powers, despite frequently choosing not to use them. Her relationship with her husband is not explored in depth in the literature, but whilst it seems amicable there is nevertheless a suggestion of a certain competitiveness between them, a tension that revolves around their individual liberty of power and sexual practice. She can be seen to be resisting Óðinn's implicit attempts to marginalise her, but her non-compliance often renders her a marginal figure in any case. Frigg avoids, or is

³⁹⁶ Lindow (1997) 121 has alternatively argued that Baldr's position of honour in Hel's abode is not a caricature of marriage, but rather because Snorri 'had trouble imagining or portraying a woman in charge anywhere, even in the depths of the world of the dead.'

³⁹⁷ Motz (1980) 170.

discouraged from, acting independently within the social context of her husband's realm, but is nevertheless willing to do so in the event that interference will be to her personal benefit, or in dire need for that society. She is also demonstrates a willingness to reject or embrace the identities that society places upon her, to suit her own needs: she can reject acting like a queen in such a way as to give her personal power and wealth, but when her help is truly needed she can function as an ideal queen attempting to heal society.

The overall picture portrays a figure who is powerful, aristocratic, independent, dynamic, sexually confident, and willing to involve herself in a political/social realm that is alien to her nature: in short, she is a figure not unlike Óðinn himself. The tensions that exist between Óðinn and Frigg can to some extent be seen to arise, not out of their essential differences, but out of their similarities. She can be seen as her husband's mirror, a female figure who naturally possesses the female powers that he himself is seeking, but who possesses an independent will over which he cannot wield control. As much as it is Óðinn's prerogative to create images of women as a means of controlling or suppressing them, the literature equally portrays Frigg's prerogative as one of resistance to that act.

2.2.3. Iðunn

Iðunn cannot in any sense be described as a well-developed literary character. It has been suggested that she may originally have been a hypostasis of Freyja.³⁹⁸ It is clear, however, that the preserved literature takes them as separate characters, and so this thesis will do so as well. The relative inconspicuousness of the Ásynjur, particularly the 'domestic' goddesses who appear to have been part of that category from the notional beginning of Æsir society, has already been commented on, but Iðunn is worthy of consideration in view of the function that she provides within divine society. It has been suggested that her name

³⁹⁸ North (1997) xiv.

means ‘the rejuvenating one’, and this would agree with the standard role she performs.³⁹⁹

Gylfaginning relates the following exchange between Hár and Gangleri, which comprises the first substantial reference to Iðunn in Snorri’s work:

‘Kona hans er Iðunn. Hon varðveitir í eski sínu epli þau er goðin skulu á bíta þá er þau eldask, ok verða þá allir ungir, ok svá mun vera allt til ragnarøkrs.’

Þá mælir Gangleri: ‘Allmikit þykki mér goðin eiga undir gæzlu eða trúnaði Iðunnar.’

Þá mælir Hár ok hló við: ‘Nær lagði þat ófæru einu sinni. Kunna mun ek þar af at segja, en þú skalt nú fyrst heyra nöfn Ásanna fleiri.’

[‘Iðunn is [Bragi’s] wife. In her casket she keeps the apples which the gods have to eat when they grow old, and then they all become young, and so it will always be until *ragnarök*.’ Then Gangleri said: ‘It seems to me that the gods are greatly dependent on Iðunn’s guardianship and faithfulness.’ Then Hár said with laughter: ‘It brought disaster close on one occasion. I will be able to say more of that, but now you must first hear further names of the Æsir.’]⁴⁰⁰

Iðunn’s function is, in terms of Hár’s description, her most important aspect. No comment is made upon her character or nature, a fact which is highlighted by Gangleri, the outsider, drawing attention to the possibility that the effectiveness of Iðunn’s power is to some extent reliant on her hitherto unremarked upon personality. Jochens has argued that Gangleri’s comment should be taken as an indication of suspicion, and that ‘it is difficult to explain this suspicion in any other way than by her gender.’⁴⁰¹ That Hár dismisses Gangleri’s concerns about the vulnerability of the Æsir with levity is telling: it is a story to be told later for amusement, but in the meantime it is more important that Gangleri learn more of the male gods. Gangleri’s comment invites a tangential discourse, one which

³⁹⁹ Simek (1993) 171.

⁴⁰⁰ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 25.

⁴⁰¹ Jochens (1996) 70.

touches upon the relevance of female power to divine society, but Hár's response reaffirms the primacy of the male gods, forcing the topic of conversation back to the constructed patriarchal hierarchy. This agrees with what may be seen as a broader theme of literature concerning the gods, and their rather casual treatment of their female counterparts.⁴⁰² For Hár, Iðunn is uninteresting beyond her function, and worthy of discourse only when access to her is threatened. It could also be assumed that Hár would wish to curb further discussion concerning Iðunn, as her function draws attention to the inconvenient truth of the gods' mortality and serves to undermine the sense of the Æsir's power that he is attempting to impress upon Gangleri.

In spite of Hár's flippancy, it is clear that Gangleri has realised Iðunn's importance. In the previous section (2.2.2.), it was suggested that Frigg's actions concerning her son involved the bestowal of a kind of functional immortality, and Iðunn's function can be seen as related to that: it is the provision of longevity, a life-giving principle, for the Æsir.⁴⁰³ Iðunn, in a sense, can be seen to function as an inversion of the figure of Elli, the concept of old age manifested as the old woman whom Þórr chose to wrestle (discussed in 1.2.2.), an inversion that is further emphasised through the juxtaposition of the company the two females keep: the life-giving Iðunn is situated with the society of the ordered and social Æsir, but her inversion, the life-consuming Elli, is situated within the destructive and treacherous society of the giants. There is also a sense that the control of Iðunn is the factor that keeps the force represented by Elli at bay: the giants covet Iðunn, and the one occasion on which they temporarily succeed in capturing her is the only moment in the mythology that the gods become subject to old age.⁴⁰⁴ The kidnapping of Iðunn, referenced above in

⁴⁰² Motz (1980) 170.

⁴⁰³ Clunies Ross (1994a) 118 has argued that the apples represent fertility. This is, in general terms, correct, but I follow Bragg (2004) 84 in arguing that this cannot be the primary association of the apples in this particular myth: eternal youth is an alternative to, not a supporter of, procreation.

⁴⁰⁴ Described in *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 1-2 and *Þjóðólfr of Hvinr* (1997) 2-8 (stanzas 1-13).

Gylfaginning and explored in greater depth in *Skáldskaparmál* and *Haustlög*, is interesting for a variety of reasons, and is worth summarising:

Óðinn, Hænir and Loki are wandering in the wilderness, and finding it difficult to acquire food. Finding a herd of oxen, they kill one and attempt to cook it, only to discover that it will not cook because of the magical interference of an eagle in a nearby tree. The eagle demands a share of the meal in exchange for allowing the gods access to the ox, which they accept. Believing the eagle is taking too much, Loki hits it with a stick, which instantly becomes stuck to both Loki and the bird; the latter flies off, taking Loki with it, and the god is repeatedly dragged along the ground and hurled into rocks and trees. Loki pleads for mercy, which the eagle grants on the condition that Loki assist him in kidnapping Iðunn. Loki carries through the plan, and the eagle is revealed to be the giant Þjazi. The gods immediately feel the effects of age, and coerce Loki into retrieving Iðunn. Borrowing Freyja's feather-form, Loki, as a falcon, flies to Þjazi's territory, coming upon Iðunn there whilst the giant is out fishing. Loki turns Iðunn into a nut, and flies back to Ásgarðr with the eagle-shaped Þjazi in close pursuit. The gods build a bonfire which Loki manages to avoid, but into which the giant falls and is quickly destroyed.

This episode follows the recurring story pattern in which the giants seize a person or object that is vital to the gods, but is uniquely interesting for several reasons.⁴⁰⁵ It is also seems to have many similarities with the myth of Baldr's death. Hár's comment quoted above makes specific reference to *ragnarök*, indicating that Iðunn's life-giving power is limited in scope and will not survive the final conflict, the coming of which is indivisibly bound to Baldr's death. The continued existence of Baldr represents the hope of the continuation of divine society, a factor which is paralleled by Iðunn's powers; the removal of either Baldr or Iðunn from divine society (into the hands of the giants Þjazi or Hel) creates a situation where the successful continuation of divine society as a whole is placed

⁴⁰⁵ McKinnell (2005) 5.

in imminent peril. Given the parity between these two situations, it is noticeable that they produce a very different emotional response; Iðunn's kidnapping and the subsequent rapid ageing of the gods, as it is described in *Skáldskaparmál*, is answered with a calm and efficient meeting of the Æsir to discuss these circumstances, and to terrorise Loki into assisting with Iðunn's return.⁴⁰⁶ During this episode there is no insight into any emotional turmoil on the part of the gods, and the only retrospective emotional response to the event is that given by Hár above, which is characterised with levity.

This apparent lack of fear or concern regarding the vulnerability of divine society following Iðunn's loss is in stark contrast to the grief and desperation inspired by both Baldr's death and the dreams that pre-empt it.⁴⁰⁷ The fear of Baldr's death is the entire motivating force of both the poem *Baldr draumar* and Frigg's dynamic and all-encompassing act of protection; when Baldr is nevertheless slain, his funeral is marked with abject grief, and he may only be redeemed from Hel by a show of universal grief.⁴⁰⁸ The juxtaposition of the emotions that are threaded through these narratives concerning the absence of Baldr and Iðunn suggests that, despite their similar function, a greater premium is being placed on the masculine sustaining power. It is true, of course, that Baldr is dead and Iðunn is not, which does have some bearing on the situation, but the way in which death is configured here still means that both situations involve one of the gods being held captive by an antagonistic giant, a situation from which it is possible to rescue them. That Baldr is more greatly valued, in terms of the mourning his loss causes once he is delivered into enemy hands, is suggestive of the patriarchal mindset of divine society: unlike the case of Iðunn (and the other goddesses), it is perceived as neither inevitable or acceptable that he should temporarily fall into enemy hands.

⁴⁰⁶ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 1-2.

⁴⁰⁷ See, for example, 'Baldrs draumar' 1-2 and *Gylfaginning* (2005) 45.

⁴⁰⁸ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 46-8.

The culmination of the story of Iðunn's kidnapping is further suggestive of this patriarchal worldview. In the first instance, neither the *Haustlög* nor *Skáldskaparmál* accounts make any reference to Iðunn possessing her own sense of will: she is moved from divine society to giant society and back again by the actions of male figures. There is no indication of which situation she favours, if any, and her captivity by the giant is presented in much the same fashion as her domestic situation amongst the Æsir. Indeed, the degree to which Þjazi can be seen as Iðunn's captor is questionable. *Skáldskaparmál* portrays him as willing to leave her alone in his abode when he goes fishing, and the lack of security is evident in the ease with which Loki in the form of an eagle gains entry into the place, all of which suggests that Þjazi is not overly concerned that Iðunn may attempt an escape.

Despite the immense implications of her power, Iðunn is portrayed as entirely passive in this particular episode. Jochens has even argued that there is the clear suggestion, at least from the point of view of Gangleri, the male speaker, that Iðunn, as a female, lacks the competence or the character to guard the apples; Jochens further notes that 'this passage must have imparted to listeners and readers the distinct impression that women could not be entrusted with responsibility.'⁴⁰⁹ That the lack of faith in her independent agency is shared by others besides Gangleri is most apparent in the manner in which she is returned to the Æsir by the falcon-shaped Loki: she is transformed into a nut and carried in his talons. The story in fact contains several instances of transformation, and a clear distinction is made along gender lines: both Loki and Þjazi assume bird-forms under their own will and out of a need for the convenience and utility of flight. Iðunn, in contrast, is transformed into an inanimate object rather than an animal, and it is made clear that Loki is the direct cause of this: *Brá Loki henni í hnotar líki* 'Loki changed her into the form of a nut'.⁴¹⁰ The relationship between nuts and apples as life-affirming symbols has

⁴⁰⁹ Jochens (1996) 70. This reference applies to both parts of the above sentence.

⁴¹⁰ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 2.

been long accepted;⁴¹¹ consequently, Iðunn's transformation into a nut is thematically related to her function as a life-giver. Nevertheless, the transformation acts as a means of redefining the goddess. The effect of Loki's masculine will is the reduction and literal objectification of Iðunn: she is not only reduced in size and deprived of animation, but she is also reduced to nothing more than a symbol of her power, a symbol of that which the gods value in her even as they seize her back. Her life-giving function is ultimately rendered as an impersonalised trophy over which gods and giants contest.⁴¹²

The manner of Þjazi's death, burning, is perhaps a reflection on the loss of Iðunn's life-giving principle; just as Hár's comment quoted earlier foreshadows the inevitability of the gods' destruction in the fires of *ragnarök*, the point to which Iðunn's gift of longevity will lead them, so too is Þjazi consumed by fire once he has had his appointed share of her power. Given the parallels suggested above between this story and that of Baldr's death, it is also possible to read Baldr's funeral pyre in a similar light: once circumstances no longer permit the principle of longevity to apply, then the only recourse is fire.⁴¹³ If Elli is an inverted reflection of Iðunn, so too to some extent is Hyrrokkin, the troll-woman who officiates at Baldr's funeral (and whose relationship with Þórr was discussed in 1.2.2.).

Iðunn, in conclusion, represents an extremely potent female force that is not accompanied by the expressive will that characterises the other goddesses who are treated here. She is, however, a clear example of the way in which an empowered female character, once taken within the social circle of the patriarchal Æsir, can be sidelined and reduced to a specific identity that has been constructed for her. Little emphasis is laid on her personality, emotional state, or even her existence beyond her function as a life-giver. In spite of this, it has been shown that her function is pivotal to the continued existence of

⁴¹¹ Ellis Davidson (1964) 165-6.

⁴¹² Motz (1980) 172.

⁴¹³ Another interpretation of the fire motif, offered by Clunies Ross (1994a) 118, is that it represents the idea of cooking, harking back to the meal at the start of the episode.

divine society, and that from an objective standpoint she has a level of importance that rivals that of Baldr, with whom she has much in common. She is subject to male redefinition, demonstrated through her reduction to an object that is symbolic only of the useful function she provides to divine society.

2.3. The ‘External’ Ásynjur

2.3.1. Introduction

This section will examine the figures of Gerðr, Skaði and Freyja. Unlike Frigg and Iðunn, all three of these figures are powerful women who have been incorporated into the society of the Æsir from outside the social grouping. Their assimilation into divine society, furthermore, is recorded in the extant literary material. In terms of social standing, it is Freyja who is arguably the most prominent of these three figures; it is certainly true to say that she receives the greatest exposure in the literature.⁴¹⁴ Despite her seemingly higher status, however, Gerðr and Skaði will be examined first, as an analysis of their situations can throw important light on the literary characterisation of Freyja.

An important aspect of these three women is that they are associated with the Vanir, rather than with the Æsir figures that have been discussed up to this point.⁴¹⁵ The status of the Vanir in divine society is imperfectly understood; indeed, even their existence as a category distinct from the rest of the gods has recently been called into question.⁴¹⁶ Whilst piecing together the ritual origins and significances of the Vanir is a complicated issue, and certainly not the intent of this study, the extant literary evidence seems to make a clear category distinction between the Æsir and the Vanir: if the compilers of this mythology have misunderstood the beliefs and myths of their forefathers they have been remarkably consistent in their misunderstanding, and consequently I follow Tolley’s assertion that ‘the poetic mentions of the *vanir* are surely sufficient to establish them as a traditionally recognised group of gods, at least within certain traditions preserved within Iceland, before Snorri’.⁴¹⁷ The Vanir, represented primarily by the trinity of Njörðr, Freyr

⁴¹⁴ Simek (1993) 90-1.

⁴¹⁵ For a thorough survey of all the literary appearances of the Vanir, and a summary of the critical discourse surrounding these figures, see Tolley (2011).

⁴¹⁶ Simek (2010). It should be noted that Tolley (2011) provides a direct and open rebuttal of Simek’s findings.

⁴¹⁷ Tolley (2011) 21.

and Freyja, exist as a separate tribe of divine beings who, despite being honoured and important within the social circle of the gods, are nevertheless portrayed as second-class individuals compared to their Æsir counterparts.⁴¹⁸ This is an important concept, as their status as figures that deviate, however minimally, from the centre of normative Æsir society puts them in a unique position from a literary point of view: these are the highest ranking characters for whom it appears permissible for them to form marriage with figures who are external to their social circle.⁴¹⁹ Whilst the exploits of the Æsir discussed above reflect certain tensions regarding the rights and responsibilities of the male figure in a marriage, the existence of the Vanir poses further questions that have more of a focus on the suitability of external brides, a category in which Gerðr and Skaði belong.

2.3.2. Gerðr

Gerðr is a giantess who is portrayed as the wife of Freyr, a member of the Vanir and the ‘most powerful god of fertility.’⁴²⁰ The story of her wooing is the central concern of the poem *Skírnismál*, and passing references to her status as Freyr’s wife are also made in the poems *Lokasenna* and *Völuspá in skamma*.⁴²¹ Using these poetic materials as his source, Snorri faithfully relates the story in *Gylfaginning*.⁴²² A euhemerised version of Gerðr also plays a minor role in *Ynglinga saga*, where she is once again Freyr’s wife.⁴²³ Despite the fact that, with the notable exception of *Skírnismál*, she is a relatively minor figure, her presentation is nevertheless remarkably consistent. In terms of her real-world ritual significance, Gerðr is probably related to Freyr’s fertility function and stands as a representative of the earth that must be tamed for agricultural endeavour: the traditional

⁴¹⁸ Dumézil (1973) 4.

⁴¹⁹ Clunies Ross (1994a) 58.

⁴²⁰ Simek (1993) 91.

⁴²¹ ‘Lokasenna’ 42 and ‘Hyndlolióð’ 30.

⁴²² *Gylfaginning* (2005) 30-32.

⁴²³ *Ynglinga saga* (1941) 24.

reading of *Skírnismál* has thus been to view the poem as manifestation of *hieros gamos*.⁴²⁴

Whilst this reading of the poem has undeniable validity, more recent scholarship has begun to see the poem as one that intentionally problematises the concept of *hieros gamos* and thereby interrogates the social norms of the culture that created it, particularly in terms of the potential problems of patriarchy.⁴²⁵ It is also possible that *Skírnismál* is a composite of ideas born out of several distinct traditions, and may reflect multiple ritual practices.⁴²⁶

Whatever the ritual significance of the myth that functions as the source for the poetry, it is impossible to deny that the central theme of unrequited and actively resisted love is portrayed with subtlety and technical accomplishment: taken simply as literature, the presentation of this ‘openly violent’ love story, as Simek terms it, is one of the most intimate insights Old Norse literature offers into the mechanics of a forced relationship.⁴²⁷

Structural similarities between *Skírnismál* and *Þrymskviða* have been noted, and it can be fruitful to compare the two poems.⁴²⁸ Both stories concern a male god, attended by a personal emissary, who by external influence is placed in a position of dire need that necessitates a visit to the world of the giants where the object of need must be cunningly procured, via a sacrifice on the god’s part, from a society that does not wish to release it; both stories ultimately have a resolution that appears ideal on a surface level but that on deeper examination is in some sense problematised. As well as their structural parity, both poems mediate on the similar themes of duty, sacrifice, gender identity and the interaction between male and female figures. There are, of course, certain important differences between them as well: Þórr is a more proactive figure than Freyr, which consequently means that Loki’s role as an emissary is a brief one that transforms into that of assistant and enabler, a transformation that never happens to Skírnir. It is also important to note that

⁴²⁴ Prominent studies in this direction include Olsen (1909), Phillpotts (1920) 137-43 and Dronke (1962).

⁴²⁵ For example, Lönnroth (1977), Motz (1981), Mitchell (1983) and Simek (2001).

⁴²⁶ Dronke (1962) 255.

⁴²⁷ Simek (2001) 229.

⁴²⁸ Mitchell (1983) 120-1.

whilst Þórr's actions may be ethically questionable, he is manoeuvred into the situation by external forces. Freyr, by contrast, seems more culpable: his vision of Gerðr is obtained by his own presumptuous use of Óðinn's throne, and the loss of his sword is the result of his own decision.

In both poems, the immediate action of the story and the long-term consequences of what transpires are centred upon the use and transfer of weapons: Þórr's hammer and Freyr's sword. The attributes and associations of Mjöltnir are well documented in the literature, and have already been discussed (in 1.2.4. and 1.3.3.). The loss of Þórr's hammer not only puts the gods in immediate peril, but its removal also foreshadows Þórr's transformation into a female figure; symbolically deprived of his genitals and emasculated, he becomes in practice a woman. The attributes and history of Freyr's unnamed sword are much less well understood. According to Snorri's account, *þat var svá gott sverð at sjálfvask* 'it was such a good sword that it fought by itself.'⁴²⁹ Though the subject is treated more subtly in *Skírnismál* than in *Prymskviða*, a comparison of the structure of the two poems emphasises the phallic connotations of Freyr's weapon. Freyr is a fertility deity, and Adam of Bremen's description of his idol draws attention to his priapic nature;⁴³⁰ it is consequently not difficult to imagine Freyr's sword as a penis substitute. It has a clear phallic meaning, and doubles as a metaphor for Freyr's personal power and authority.⁴³¹ Its independent movement is suggestive: the penis is a 'sword' that can raise itself without the necessity of its being wielded by its owner.

Snorri's paraphrase is not quite the same as the actual description of the sword given by Skírnir, who mentions '*þat sverð, er siálfvaskir/ við iǫtna ætt!*' 'that sword which fights by itself against giants' kin!'⁴³² Skírnir's qualification is important in terms of

⁴²⁹ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 31.

⁴³⁰ Adam of Bremen (1917) 258.

⁴³¹ Kress (2002) 83.

⁴³² 'För Skírnis' 8.

understanding the sword's meaning: as has been noted, giants are the enemies of the gods but giantesses are the most frequent object of divine lust. As *ætt* 'kin' is a gender neutral term, Skírnir's phrase seems to suggest not only military aggression against the giants, but also an undercurrent of sexual aggression. Freyr's response to Skírnir provides an interesting juxtaposition: he describes the sword as '*þat sverð, er siálf mun vegaz, ef sá er horskr, er hefir*' 'that sword which will fight by itself if the one who holds it is wise.'⁴³³

These two quotations represent the second half of stanzas 9 and 10 respectively, the first half in each case concerning the other part of Skírnir's payment, which is a good horse.

Whilst Freyr repeats Skírnir's description of the horse almost verbatim, he chooses to amend Skírnir's pronouncement on the nature of the sword. This correction is an important one: Skírnir describes the independent agency of the sword, but Freyr introduces the idea of a mutually dependent relationship between the sword and its owner. If the sword can be read as a symbol of virility and sexual potency, then Freyr's discourse on the wisdom required to wield it successfully suggests the necessity of an element of discernment. The sword/penis may have an independent existence in terms of its natural impulses and reactions, but it must be tempered by higher common sense in the choice of sexual partner.

Read this way, Freyr's relinquishing of his sword is not only the surrendering of martial power, but also of sexual independence. Freyr has fallen prey to what Óðinn cautions against in *Hávamál* 113-4 (as discussed in 1.3.2.): his infatuation with Gerðr has emasculated him by stripping him of his emotional detachment from the sexual act. The removal of his sword has symbolic significance, an acknowledgement that even before she is introduced to the story Gerðr's beauty and sexual allure have dominated Freyr. The symbolic nature of giving up of the sword is emphasised by its irrelevance to the plot: the theft of Mjöltnir is the central concern of *Þrymskviða*, the immediate peril caused by its

⁴³³ 'För Skírnis' 9.

absence emphasised by the fact that it is now in enemy hands. In *Skírnismál*, by contrast, it is not clear why Skírnir wants the sword. If the giving of the sword to Skírnir can be read as a means of indicating that Freyr's masculine independence has been compromised even before the central action of the poem has commenced, then the balance of power in terms of gender interactions is already destabilised: the poem may be about bending Gerðr to Freyr's will, but his will is no longer his own as from the outset it is entirely subject to the external influence of her beauty: he has been 'disarmed' by Gerðr, in both meanings of the word.⁴³⁴ By creating for her the identity of his paramour, even before he has physically encountered her, she obtains power over him. Whilst his compromised condition does not excuse Freyr's violent and belligerent courtship of Gerðr, his giving away of his sword is emblematic of the sacrifices he has had to make, and the personal losses he has had to suffer. Whilst *Skírnismál* gives no indication of the long-term consequences of the loss of the sword, they are noted by Loki in *Lokasenna*.⁴³⁵ Snorri, in his recounting of the myth in *Gylfaginning*, chooses to include this detail in the body of the story, adding an eschatological element to Freyr's sacrifice: by falling under female influence, he compromises his viability as a fighter at *ragnarök*, not only dooming himself but also reducing whatever assistance he might have granted to divine society as a whole.

A comparison between *Skírnismál* and *Þrymskviða* also potentially sheds light on the nature of the emissary figure, Skírnir. Freyr's attendant is an enigmatic figure who, despite his prominent role in accounts of this myth, appears nowhere else in Norse mythology save for a minor role in Snorri's account of the fettering of the Fenrisúlfr.⁴³⁶ His name, the 'Shining-One', has usually been taken as an indication that Skírnir is an emanation of Freyr himself.⁴³⁷ Whilst this may be so, the poem itself nevertheless gives

⁴³⁴ McKinnell (2005) 8.

⁴³⁵ 'Lokasenna' 42.

⁴³⁶ Simek (1993) 290. See *Gylfaginning* (2005) 27-8.

⁴³⁷ Dronke (1962) 263.

little insight into his physical nature: Skírnir categorically denies that he is one of the Æsir, Vanir or Álfar.⁴³⁸ On the strength of this assertion, Simek argues that Skírnir is probably human.⁴³⁹ Though there is some validity in imagining the actions of a human courtier obeying the whims of a god presented in regal terms, this argument seems tenuous: unlike in the case of Óðinn, Freyja and Hel, there is no indication that Freyr assembles human followers in his hall, so a human Skírnir would be out of place.

An alternative approach would be to see the ambiguity of Skírnir's nature as deliberate, which in part serves to relate his function to that of Loki in *Þrymskviða*. Like Loki, Skírnir defies a clear category distinction: they are both neither-one-thing-nor-another. Whilst there is no indication in the literature that Skírnir is synonymous with Loki, the similarities of their function as emissary do invite an analysis of the former in the context of the wider and more developed characterisation of the latter. Whilst Loki is quickly relegated to a supporting role in *Þrymskviða*, it is nevertheless his intellect and apparent understanding of female mentality that allows Þórr to succeed: these same attributes are what allow Skírnir to succeed as both emissary and central protagonist of *Skírnismál*. The ill-defined quality of Skírnir's nature makes him, like the marginal Loki, a being well suited to a mediatory function.⁴⁴⁰ Skírnir demonstrates the same cunning and inventiveness as Loki, and these are aspects of him that contrast strongly with the all-consuming and, as of the end of the poem, unresolved monomania of Freyr.

Skírnir's method of compelling Gerðr to his will, which involves bribery and threats of violence before moving finally to a series of graphically imagined threats of magical punishment, in an abstract sense reflects the capacities and outlook of Loki in *Þrymskviða* (as discussed in 1.4.2.): he is one who possesses a fundamental understanding

⁴³⁸ 'För Scírnis' 18.

⁴³⁹ Simek (2001) 232.

⁴⁴⁰ Indeed, his brief role as emissary in Snorri's account of the fettering of the Fenrisúlfr seems to be a case of him 'filling-in' for Loki, who for obvious reasons would not be willing to assist in that particular task.

of female mentality but who retains a patriarchal and profound degree of contempt for it. Skírnir, as the representative of patriarchy, must forcefully transform Gerðr into a sexualised being: she must be ‘made to understand intellectually the power of female desire – her own’ by whatever means necessary, and contrary to her naive will if need be.⁴⁴¹ As frequently happens in Old Norse literature, male desire is the driving force of divine society, and must on no account be refused.⁴⁴² It is this desire that works to redefine Gerðr’s nature, against her will.

A substantial part of the poem is given over to Skírnir’s description of the various magical torments he intends to inflict upon Gerðr as a punishment in case of her non-compliance; the section looms large in contrast to the relative brevity of those dealing with bribery and physical threats;⁴⁴³ the heavy emphasis on magical punishments, as well as the lurid description of them, suggest that it is a concept of profound interest to the poet.⁴⁴⁴ This section of ten stanzas, 26-36, describes a process of debasement that it is to be visited upon Gerðr that involves her exile beyond any kind of civilised world to a place where she must cohabit with monsters, live in and subsist on filth, and finally be visited with an insatiable and frenzied lust for the creatures with whom she must now exist. Though the similarity might not be immediately apparent, Skírnir’s role here parallels that of Loki in *Þrymskviða*: section 1.4.2 above discussed at length the subtle manner in which Loki constructs the image of the Freyja-Þórr figure in such a way as to define her as a female figure of monstrous appetite, and in a sense Skírnir is achieving a very similar effect in his construction of Gerðr’s new persona.⁴⁴⁵ Gerðr’s reconstructed identity is rendered with monstrous appetites that echo those attributed to Freyja-Þórr: she will be driven by hunger

⁴⁴¹ Jochens (1996) 56.

⁴⁴² Dronke (1962) 255.

⁴⁴³ Stanzas 19, 21, 23 and 25 deal with the attempted bribe and Skírnir’s physical threat against Gerðr, whilst stanzas 26-36 deal with his list of magical torments.

⁴⁴⁴ It has also been suggested that Skírnir’s words may have paralleled contemporary real-world curses: see Clunies Ross (1994a) 138-9.

⁴⁴⁵ For a further connection, McKinnell draws a comparison between Skírnir’s actions and those of Óðinn in the Rindr myth. See McKinnell (2005) 158-9.

to subsist on filth in the absence of any other food, and driven to satisfy her lust on the monstrous male figures near to hand. Both descriptions rely on a certain degree of voyeurism, although directed in different ways: by constructing the Freyja-Þórr image in such a way as to indulge Þrymr's masculine fantasy of the sexually rapacious goddess, Loki ensures the success of Þórr's mission, whereas in creating a similar identity for Gerðr, Skírnir horrifies her by the possibility of such an existence that she becomes tractable to his will. To satisfy what Kress has termed the 'rage of societal and patriarchal power', the disobedience of the female must be punished by transformation into an appropriately debased identity of rapacious and insatiable sexuality.⁴⁴⁶ Gerðr is cast into a new identity that removes her ability to moderate and manage her own sexual independence.

On a surface level Skírnir's forcing of Gerðr to his will seems to be a violent and misogynistic manifestation of the patriarchal oppression of independent women, one in which ultimately 'the shrew is tamed'.⁴⁴⁷ Here it will be argued, however, that as with the Freyja-Þórr image there is also an element of empowerment in this case, which Gerðr turns to her advantage. Larrington has argued that Skírnir's curse paradoxically reflects women's social desires, so that ultimately Gerðr's choice is 'circumscribed by her existence in a patriarchal culture, by the fact that she is enculturated to need male approval.'⁴⁴⁸ Although Gerðr is perforce required to operate within a patriarchal framework, and consequently has to accept one of two pre-set choices, it is nevertheless possible to read her actions as having a degree of proactive intent, an intent that is bent towards exacting some kind of vengeance for this situation. Dronke has suggested that the debased fate Skírnir describes for Gerðr represents a hideous parody of life amongst the gods.⁴⁴⁹ If Dronke's suggestion

⁴⁴⁶ Kress (2002) 82.

⁴⁴⁷ Kress (2002) 83.

⁴⁴⁸ Larrington (1992) 14.

⁴⁴⁹ Dronke (1962) 260.

is correct and Gerðr's threatened fate is indeed parodic of her actual fate, then it invites a juxtaposition between the two states.

From a non-partisan perspective, Gerðr's choice is to some extent illusory: regardless of which choice she makes from the two absolute options with which she is presented, Gerðr will be absorbed into an alien and unfamiliar society as a concubine defined by the sexual desires of the male figures with whom she cohabits, although that one prison cage is gilded and the other is not. Mitchell, in his analysis of *Skírnismál*'s structure, posits what he terms a 'Creative:Anti-Creative' dichotomy in the poem, according to which he views the lust that Skírnir threatens to visit upon Gerðr as the culmination of the Anti-Creative forces in the poem.⁴⁵⁰ Despite the prominent sexual activity described, there is no suggestion of procreation – it becomes a manifestation of an Anti-Creative impulse because Gerðr's potential fertility is rendered void. I do not, however, think that Mitchell is entirely correct in his assertion that Gerðr's acceptance of the marriage and Freyr's reception of this knowledge constitute an unproblematised Creative force.⁴⁵¹ Simek has noted that it is curious that the consummation of the marriage is not recorded in the poem, but I think that one can read deeper implications into the lack of sexual congress or even physical proximity between Freyr and Gerðr.⁴⁵² The lack of physical intimacy at the climax of the poem, and Freyr's manifest frustration over it, seem to be a suggestion of things to come, an imperfect ending that prefigures an imperfect future: whilst Skírnir's threatened future for Gerðr as the concubine of monsters renders her infertile, the same also seems to be true of her marriage to Freyr, a situation which hardly hints at the triumph of Mitchell's Creative force.

There is no suggestion anywhere in strictly mythological Old Norse literature that Gerðr bears Freyr any offspring (though the same cannot quite be said of accounts that

⁴⁵⁰ Mitchell (1983) 114.

⁴⁵¹ Mitchell (1983) 111.

⁴⁵² Simek (2001) 239.

euemerise Freyr and Gerðr, and these will be discussed towards the end of this section); indeed, she does not even appear in person in any extant myth set after her marriage. This is particularly noticeable in *Lokasenna*, where her absence is compounded by the fact that Freyr's marriage is alluded to by Loki; given the active presence of Skaði at that meeting of the gods, one might reasonably expect Gerðr also to be present in view of their similar status and the similarity of the slurs they both receive from Loki.⁴⁵³ The implication seems to be that Freyr and Gerðr do not enjoy a close or fruitful union, perhaps subtly echoing the marital incompatibility that openly plagues the relationship of Njörðr and Skaði.

If Gerðr's noticeable absence from other texts can be seen to have significance, and is not merely the product of the fragmentary corpus that modern scholars have inherited, then there are possibly some potential implications that could be considered. One possibility is that there is a sense that Gerðr has exacted some kind of vengeance on her tormentors, a sense that she is adopting the identity that Skírnir creates for her and forcing it upon Freyr as a deserved punishment for his presumption: by making her sexually aware, the patriarchal figures also open up to her the possible power and influence that her sexual desirability confers upon her, power and influence that she may exert over them. In much the same way as Loki's construction of Þórr's female aspect is simultaneously shaming and empowering, potentially so too is Skírnir's redefinition of Gerðr: her capitulation is an acceptance of her lack of a real choice about her future alien habitation, but in choosing to go to Freyr she can be seen to be bringing the anti-creative forces that Skírnir threatens her with to bear upon Freyr and the gods. Her acquiescence cannot, I think, be read as Gerðr coming to the sudden realisation that she belongs in a better place, as Motz has argued;⁴⁵⁴ as with Þórr in *Þrymskviða*, Gerðr instead utilises her debasement as a strategy of vengeance. Perhaps when Gerðr says '*Ánauð þola ek vil aldregi/ at mannzkis munom*' 'I

⁴⁵³ Dronke (1962) 262 summarises the similarities between Gerðr and Skaði.

⁴⁵⁴ Motz (1981) 123.

will not suffer oppression on account of anyone's desires', the reader is supposed to take her literally at her word.⁴⁵⁵ If the readers of the poem can divorce themselves from agreeing with the patriarchal discourse the poem presents on its surface level, it is possible to read a certain heroism in Gerðr's actions, and to realise that to reject Freyr's proposal would paradoxically be to submit entirely to patriarchal will.⁴⁵⁶

The wider political implications suggested by Gerðr's non-fertility, if indeed her non-fertility is implied by the way in which she is portrayed, should be considered further. *Skírnismál* as a whole invests itself in the language of political discourse and in particular in the political dimensions of marriage. Attention has been drawn to the poem's portrayal of Freyr as a fertility god and to Gerðr's association with the earth in such a way as render it 'undoubtedly' a manifestation of *hieros gamos*.⁴⁵⁷ Whilst *hieros gamos* is almost certainly the central concept of the base myth, the poem itself arguably takes a much more complex approach to the idea of the king and his lover, the land: it focuses on the potential social issues of royal marriage in a human-like political scenario, rather than functioning as just an elaborate allegory.

A majority of the adjectives and titles used to describe Freyr define him in terms of royal bearing rather than through his function as a fertility deity, and many of them are paralleled in other texts describing royal figures.⁴⁵⁸ If Freyr, within the context of *Skírnismál*, can be seen, as Motz terms him, to be 'the divine image of the king', then by extension the poem involves itself in a discourse on the advantages and pitfalls of securing a foreign and culturally 'other' royal bride.⁴⁵⁹ The action of *Skírnismál* has also been connected with the foundation of the Norwegian kingdom, a view which is now widely

⁴⁵⁵ 'For Skírnir' 24.

⁴⁵⁶ Larrington (1992) 3-6 suggests, I think accurately, that separating Freyr/Skírnir's viewpoint from that of the reader has been just as difficult for modern critics as it might have been for a contemporary audience.

⁴⁵⁷ Dronke (1962) 253-4.

⁴⁵⁸ Simek (2001) 323-3 gives a comprehensive survey of these adjectives and titles, as well as their use elsewhere in Old Norse literature.

⁴⁵⁹ Motz (1996) 22.

accepted and which gives the political aspects of the poem a certain immediacy for a contemporary audience.⁴⁶⁰ While Freyr functions as a king, his infatuation with and desire to pursue Gerðr not only has implications for him on a personal level, but also for the society that surrounds a royal figure. I am minded to agree with Mitchell's conclusion that Gerðr's most important attribute is not, as some have suggested, that she represents a kind of perfected giantess who must be rescued and adopted into a 'better' society, but rather that her most important attribute is that she is a proper giantess, noble but alien in her own right.⁴⁶¹ Even before she appears as an active force in the poem, Gerðr exerts a powerful and socially disruptive influence over Freyr: he becomes disaffected, restless and frustrated. The concern shown by Skaði for his emotional state is indicative of the fact that his behaviour is not only noticeable, but sufficiently alarming as to warrant immediate investigation;⁴⁶² though it may only be a subtle suggestion, by implication Freyr is neglecting his royal duties and this is having a discernible impact on the running of his court, in a manner reminiscent of the listlessness Óðinn warns against in *Hávamál* 113-4. What follows, in terms of the negotiations for which Skírnir is dispatched, is a catastrophic process of courtship in which everything is mishandled.

The first action of courtship is Skírnir's attempt to secure Gerðr's compliance through the giving of gifts, a standard form of political communication.⁴⁶³ His offer of Iðunn's apples of immortality and Óðinn's ever-reproducing ring Draupnir are problematic, raising concerns about both the value he places on Gerðr's acceptance and also the manner in which he claims access to these things.⁴⁶⁴ Steinsland has suggested that they represent the symbols of royal authority, further compounding Freyr's identification

⁴⁶⁰ Steinsland (1991) 169ff.

⁴⁶¹ Mitchell (1983) 122.

⁴⁶² 'För Skírnis' 1.

⁴⁶³ Mitchell (1983) 116-7.

⁴⁶⁴ 'För Skírnis' 19-22.

as a king figure in the poem.⁴⁶⁵ Mitchell, on the other hand, has tentatively suggested that Skírnir's access to these valuable objects associated with other deities suggest the tacit approval of the love match amongst Freyr's peer-group.⁴⁶⁶ I would suggest, alternatively, that the reference to these high-status objects is important as a means of bringing the wider spectrum of the gods' social structure into focus: the items are involved in the marriage because they are emblematic of the way in which the entirety of a society is involved in the marriage of a royal person. In a manner similar to Freyr's giving up of his sword, with the individual martial and sexual freedom that it represents, divine society is forced by the circumstances of this marriage suit to hazard the two items which symbolise both eternal life and eternal wealth. Clunies Ross has suggested that the giving of Draupnir links the wooing of Gerðr with the death of Baldr, and consequently represents a healing action that attempts to use one of the products of Baldr's death as a bargaining chip in improving relations between the gods and their traditional enemy;⁴⁶⁷ I would argue instead that the potential loss of Draupnir equates Gerðr's marriage with Baldr's death, signifying the harm that it will do to divine society. The myth concerning Iðunn's apples (as discussed in 2.2.3.) demonstrates the considerable eschatological implications that come of their falling into giants' hands. Freyr, through Skírnir, demonstrates the all-consuming nature of his infatuation by offering those symbols which alone are necessary to the continued successful survival of his entire society, a heavy premium to place on a bride and an offer that serves to demonstrate the threat that Gerðr, as an empowered external woman, can wield over divine society. Far from 'shamefully [agreeing] to have sex with her brother's killer', as McKinnell describes the situation, Gerðr may, in submitting to Skírnir's threats, be interpreted as placing herself, paradoxically, in a position of power and influence over

⁴⁶⁵ Steinsland (1991) 130-68.

⁴⁶⁶ Mitchell (1983) 109.

⁴⁶⁷ Clunies Ross (1994a) 232-3.

the very tribe that persecutes her kind, and over the objects which ensure their superiority.⁴⁶⁸

Skírnir's threat of violence marks the moment at which the sinister subtext of Freyr's suit becomes openly apparent, a subtext compounded by the elaborate curse that Skírnir goes on to describe. As with the offering of irreplaceable gifts, there is an element of foolishness to Skírnir's antagonism: the potential political gains to be made from a marital alliance between two enemy tribes is negated by 'highly unlawful and irregular behaviour from the legal point of view.'⁴⁶⁹ If anything, Skírnir's belligerence seems designed to incur the wrath of the giants as a whole. Gerðr's brief comment about her brother's slayer, a myth otherwise unattested in extant Old Norse literature, arguably does not require further clarification because it achieves the purpose of demonstrating the giants' concern with matters of kinship obligation.⁴⁷⁰ It is clear from this comment, furthermore, that from the outset Gerðr is not interested in obtaining reconciliation between gods and giants.⁴⁷¹ It is thus fitting that Freyr's death is not only foreshadowed in his relinquishing of his sword, but also in the fact that he will die in combat with a giant, having set himself up as a target for vengeance by kidnapping one of their own.⁴⁷² There is a certain subtle irony to be read in the situation: the man she fears to be her brother's killer is a representative of the man who would be her husband, the selfsame husband who will ultimately be killed by a male member of her kin. Rather than serving a positive political function, Gerðr's bungled inclusion into divine society fuels the vendetta that will lead to *ragnarök*.

Another way in which Gerðr's influence over Freyr can be seen to be politically destructive is in terms of the aforementioned anti-fertility motif. Freyr's apparent lack of

⁴⁶⁸ McKinnell (2005) 8.

⁴⁶⁹ Simek (2001) 237.

⁴⁷⁰ 'För Skírnis' 16.

⁴⁷¹ Dronke (1962) 252.

⁴⁷² Simek (2001) 240.

offspring, in strictly mythological literature, is unusual given his role as a fertility deity, but when his presentation as a royal figure is considered, his lack of an heir has much wider social consequences. The primary purpose of the figure of the queen, as discussed in the section concerning Frigg (2.2.2.), is that she embodies the dynastic hope of the royal line. Gerðr's antipathy towards her husband seems to manifest in his lack of an heir, and Freyr's infatuation with her, furthermore, has been argued to imply that he is monogamous, an uncharacteristic attribute amongst his fellow gods and one that seems to deprive him even of the possibility of illegitimate offspring.⁴⁷³ In much the same way as Baldr's death represents a dynastic endpoint for the Æsir, so too it is possible that Freyr's marriage represents an endpoint for the Vanir. If this is so, Gerðr can be seen to possess an apparent anti-fertility that compromises the king's own function as a fertility deity, and voids his genetic potential just as assuredly as the death of Baldr does for the royal family of the Æsir.

Gerðr, in simultaneously accepting Skírnir's proposal whilst adapting the potential future he envisages for her, becomes a manifestly powerful being who exerts considerable influence over the continued success of the society into which she enters. The identity that is created for her by the agent of patriarchy becomes a force that she can wield to patriarchy's detriment, a tool which empowers her; Freyr becomes the victim of both his own desires and the monstrous identity that Skírnir creates. Regardless of where the sympathies of the reader lie, the story as a whole reflects a social anxiety about the function of marriage, and the harm that it can do to both parties when things go wrong. The harm it can do to society, furthermore, is also emphasised: the unlegislated influence that women can wield at the highest levels of the social hierarchy through their sexual desirability can become a massively destabilising force, so much so that on a divine level it can be seen to have eschatological implications.

⁴⁷³ Dronke (1962) 250.

As mentioned above, the discussion of Gerðr's apparent lack of offspring has hitherto focused on strictly mythological literature. Before this section ends, however, some consideration must be given to the depiction of Gerðr in a different kind of literary text, namely *Ynglinga saga*.⁴⁷⁴ The way she is represented in this saga, which euhemerises the gods (i.e. presents them as historical human beings), runs contrary to much of what has been discussed above: Gerðr and Freyr are observed here as married and cohabiting, and whilst no comment is passed on their affection or lack thereof for one another, they are seen as having produced an heir named Fjölfnir. There are, however, a number of reasons why the existence of Fjölfnir in this text need not undermine the suggestions made above in this section. First, as has already been noted in the examination of Óðinn (in 1.3.3.), *Ynglinga saga* presents a world in which the 'gods' are mortal humans masquerading as divinities. In the case of Óðinn, as was argued, his mortality and his human nature allowed the saga writer to explore ideas of genetic inheritance that would not have been possible with the Óðinn of overt mythology. The *Ynglinga saga* versions of Freyr and Gerðr are similarly different from their strictly mythological counterparts. The saga makes only one brief reference to Gerðr, simply stating that she is Freyr's wife and the mother of his son, Fjölfnir.⁴⁷⁵ The fact that this reference is so fleeting, and that no further information is provided, could suggest that 'Gerðr' may simply be a convenient name to apply to a figure whose only narrative function is to supply the human and mortal Freyr with an heir. It is the intention of *Ynglinga saga* to establish a quasi-divine ancestry for the Norwegian monarchy, which is achieved by incorporating euhemerised versions of the gods into the early part of the family tree. This, of course, requires a direct line of succession, hence the narrative necessity of Fjölfnir. It is worth noting, however, that he has no parallel in eddic literature or in any other texts that depict the gods as actually divine. In *Ynglinga saga*, and

⁴⁷⁴ *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 23-5.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 24.

its predecessor *Ynglingatal*, furthermore, Fjölnir seems to mark the break point between the pseudo-divine ‘gods’ and the fully human legendary kings of pre-history: he is certainly the first of the fully human generations of the *Ynglingar* dynasty. It is, in consequence, appropriate to separate the existence of Fjölnir from the strictly mythological depictions of Freyr and Gerðr, and to acknowledge that his appearance in *Ynglinga saga* need not refute the suggestions, given above, concerning the possible infertility of Gerðr. His real importance in the saga is as an ur-ancestor of the Norwegian monarchy.

2.3.3. Skaði

Skaði shares many similarities with Gerðr, but is on the whole a better developed figure in extant mythological literature. Like Gerðr, she is a giantess who marries a prominent Vanir god, Freyr’s father Njörðr. The particulars of Skaði’s marriage into divine society are, like Gerðr’s, problematised in a variety of interesting ways that throw light on the idea of the empowered female who has the potential to become a troublesome force within a patriarchal society. Both women, importantly, have the basis for blood feud with the gods.⁴⁷⁶

An important distinction between the situations of Gerðr and Skaði, however, is the idea of open control. Whilst I have suggested above (in 2.3.2.) that the power dynamic between Gerðr and Skírnir/Freyr might not be as one-sided as it may at first appear, nevertheless *Skírnismál* on a surface level presents a situation where the female party is entirely subject to, and oppressed by, masculine will; Skaði, by contrast, is often placed in a position of empowered authority and independent will.

The longest mythological episode concerning Skaði is recounted by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*, where it functions as a sequel of sorts to the story of the kidnapping of the

⁴⁷⁶ Dronke (1962) 262.

goddess Iðunn (discussed in 2.2.3.).⁴⁷⁷ Skaði is portrayed as the daughter of the giant Þjazi, a fact corroborated by eddic poetry, who sets out to seek vengeance for his death.⁴⁷⁸ As a consequence of her martial action, she is offered the possibility of a divine husband by way of compensation, and is in essence tricked into picking Njörðr. In order for the conflict to come to a successful resolution, it is also necessary for the gods to make Skaði laugh, an effect which is achieved by some peculiar physical comedy on the part of Loki.

As McKinnell has noted, this episode functions as an ‘absurd burlesque’ of the standard style of bridal quest familiar from Norse saga, and draws attention to the narrative similarities present, but also to the important gender issue that distinguishes Skaði’s quest for a husband from of Icelandic tales in which a hero seeks a worthy bride.⁴⁷⁹ The unusualness of the situation must be noted: there are very few instances in the corpus of Old Norse literature where so much emphasis is placed on female initiative with regard to her marital fate and to larger issues.⁴⁸⁰ That the main role of the armed and armoured quester is taken by a woman also highlights the interesting parallels the story has with that of *Þrymskviða*: both Skaði and Þórr adopt the clothing and mannerisms of the opposite sex, and journey into enemy territory for purposes that are atypical for their conventional gender roles, and that are consequently problematised. It is Loki, and more specifically his unique approach to physical gender, who importantly provides the means to a happy resolution in both stories.

Snorri’s account of Skaði’s quest is brief, but richly detailed:

‘En Skaði, dóttir Þjaza jötuns, tók hjálm ok brynju ok ǫll hervápn ok ferr til

Ásgarðs at hefna fǫður síns. En Æsir buðu henni sætt ok yfirbætr, ok hit fyrsta at

⁴⁷⁷ For a summary of Skaði’s appearances in Old Norse literature, see Simek (1993) 286-7.

⁴⁷⁸ See Lindow (2001) 268 for a list of the sources linking Skaði and Þjazi.

⁴⁷⁹ McKinnell (2005) 8. See also Clunies Ross (1994a) 119.

⁴⁸⁰ Jochens (1996) 62.

hon skal kjósa sér mann af Ásum ok kjósa at fótum ok sjá ekki fleira af. Þá sá hon eins manns fœtr forkunnar fagra ok mælir:

“Þenna kys ek, fátt mun ljótt á Baldri.”

‘En þat var Njörðr ór Nóatúnum. Þat hafði hon ok í sættargjörð sinni at Æsir skyldu þat gera er hon hugði at þeir skyldu eigi mega, at hlægja hana. Þá gerði Loki þat at hann batt um skegg geitar nokkvorrar ok ǫðrum enda um hreðjar sér ok létu þau ymsi eptir ok skrækti hvárttveggja við hátt. Þá lét Loki fallask í kné Skaða ok þá hló hon. Var þá gjör sætt af Ásanna hendi við hana.’

[‘And Skaði, the daughter of the giant Þjazi, took up helm and byrnie and all war weapons and went to Ásgarðr to avenge her father. But the Æsir offered her reconciliation and compensation, and in the first place she should choose a husband from the Æsir, and that she should choose by the feet and see nothing else of them. Then she saw one man’s exceptionally beautiful feet and said:

“I choose this one; there will be little ugly about Baldr.”

‘But it was Njörðr from Nóatún. It was also in her terms of settlement that the Æsir were to do something that she thought they could not: to make her laugh. Then Loki did this: he tied a rope around the beard of a certain nanny-goat and the other end around his testicles, and they gave way in turn and both squealed loudly. Then Loki let himself drop into Skaði’s lap, and then she laughed. Then the reconciliation with her on the part of the Æsir was complete.’]⁴⁸¹

Skaði’s decision to adopt the traditionally masculine trappings of war and pursue the unladylike act of vengeance, though comical, nevertheless introduces a destabilising element by which social norms and standard roles are flouted, which colours the rest of the

⁴⁸¹ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 2.

episode.⁴⁸² In choosing to adopt masculine clothing, Skaði is actively engaged in her own re-definition, and is notably the only divine female shown engaged in cross-dressing in the extant literature.⁴⁸³ Whilst the extent of the masculinisation of her garb and actions is unclear, Skaði is ‘hardly a paragon of soft femininity’.⁴⁸⁴ Importantly, Skaði’s deviant behaviour marks the first instance in *Skáldskaparmál*’s narrative where a character goes against the conventions of their nature and gender. The kidnapping of Iðunn is the first episode related in *Skáldskaparmál*, and all the characters in that story behave in their usual roles and manners: the giant is an aggressive villain, Iðunn is a passive damsel who must be rescued, Freyja offers her usual feather-cloak, and Loki functions in his frequent roles of betrayer and intermediary. Skaði’s adoption of a deviant role consequently sets an important precedent in Snorri’s text, being the first figure to flout social and gender expectations. The disturbed sense of gender that accompanies Skaði emphasises, furthermore, the potential for destruction and chaos that her actions convey: she is a disturbance in the fundamental structure of the world. Even if the telling of the event has overtones of comedy, the speed with which the gods offer atonement and compensation suggests that they are treating Skaði as a serious threat, apparently surpassing her father in that regard.

The scale and importance of the threat Skaði poses is underscored by her openly admitted intent towards Baldr. It was argued previously (in 2.2.3) that there is a certain thematic similarity concerning the figures of Iðunn and Baldr: both represent, although in differing ways, the concepts of longevity and continued existence. By focusing her intentions on Baldr, Skaði is in some sense relating her own agenda to that of Þjazi. Both giant and giantess seek to gain influence or control over a figure whose presence is

⁴⁸² It should be noted that Skaði also displays behaviour in other texts that may be perceived as masculine in aspect, particularly with regard to her association with skiing. See Bek-Pedersen (2011) 46.

⁴⁸³ Bragg (2004) 84.

⁴⁸⁴ Jesch (1991) 139.

required for the peaceful and productive continuation of divine society. In setting her sights on Baldr, Skaði is also aiming to strike at society's highest level: as Óðinn's legitimate son, Baldr represents the most promising bachelor in the universe. In this regard Baldr is also a figure analogous to the Freyr presented in *Skírnismál*: both are described in aristocratic terms. It may, consequently, be possible to consider similarities between their prospective wives, Skaði and Gerðr. Given that Gerðr's marriage to Freyr is, as argued above (in 2.3.2.), implicitly portrayed as problematic for the Vanir line by the literature, there is perhaps also an invitation here to imagine a future where Skaði has succeeded in marrying Baldr; if Skaði's marriage to Baldr were as unproductive as Gerðr's to Freyr, or indeed as troubled as Skaði's actual marriage to Njörðr is shown to be, the insertion of this empowered independent female into divine society would have dire consequences for Óðinn's dynasty.

The Æsir's method of dealing with the threat posed by Skaði is both subtle and clever. She is offered the opportunity to pick a husband, an act which will automatically cast her in the role of wife and thus force her to adopt a standard female social role: just as she has redefined herself in masculine terms, the Æsir are requiring her to redefine herself back to a female role. It is, in essence, a clever method of re-feminising the masculine and warlike giantess by turning her into a bride.⁴⁸⁵ To prevent her from destroying divine society, an act of which she seems fully capable, it is necessary to bring her into that society, but importantly she must be brought into that society on the Æsir's terms: not as an empowered and masculine combatant, but as the wife, the adjunct, of one of their own. She, like Gerðr, is taught to be aware of her sexuality.⁴⁸⁶ The offer is, of course, a gamble: unlike most brides, Skaði is offered her choice of husband, and it is this factor that is key to the success of the Æsir's plan. Skaði is, in essence, persuaded to drop her empowered

⁴⁸⁵ Kress (2002) 85.

⁴⁸⁶ Jochens (1996) 56

pseudo-masculine role by the possibility that she might acquire an even more influential female role: whatever she might hope to achieve as a warrior, it is likely to pale in comparison with the power and wealth associated with a high-status marriage to Óðinn's heir. In terms of the power dynamics of this situation, the gods diffuse the potential threat generated by Skaði's gender-blurred state by constructing a female identity of their own for her to step into, one that potentially gives her great influence but which, importantly, will also force her into a standard female role in a patriarchal society. The situation, ultimately, works out to the gods' advantage: the danger Skaði poses is neutralised by her marriage, and rather than losing the political commodity of Baldr's desirability as a spouse, the gods are instead able to marry her off to the older and less desirable second-class Njörðr.

The concept of mixed gender, and the transition from one gendered state to another, is also represented in this episode by the involvement of Loki, whose intelligence and quick thinking are necessary for the story to be brought to a successful conclusion. As in *Þrymskviða*, Loki demonstrates a level of psychological sympathy with the female condition (as discussed in 1.4.2.): in that poem it allowed him to create a convincing female image for the Freyja-Þórr figure, albeit one that betrayed a patriarchal worldview, and here it is this faculty that allows him to be the only god able to make the necessary and profound impact on Skaði's mentality to subdue her, which is to make her laugh. The potential empathy between the two characters might be further suggested by the fact that they are both outsiders raised to godhood amongst the Æsir, and thus experience similar social transformations.⁴⁸⁷

The bizarre method by which this is accomplished, in which Loki attaches his testicles to the beard of a nanny-goat, is highly unusual. It has been suggested that the beard of the female goat is a signifier of blurred gender, and as a consequence raises

⁴⁸⁷ Jesch (1991) 141.

questions over the gender assumptions that the reader can make about the objects to which it is attached, namely Loki's testicles.⁴⁸⁸ Though this argument is valid, it may be refined further. It is important to note that this account introduces the gender-relevant elements of the story in a very particular order: the appearance of the unusually and atypically masculine Skaði, the nanny goat with the masculine but perfectly natural beard, the revelation of Loki's apparently normal and sturdy male genitalia (whatever questions the reader might have about the god's sexual nature in general), the tug-of-war between beard and genitals, and finally the denouement in which Loki falls into Skaði's lap.

There seems to be an identifiable progression in the manner in which these plot items are presented, one that moves from a state of changed gender to normal gender practices: the masculinised giantess is shown a female creature that naturally possesses a physical signifier of masculinity, and thus represents an improvement on her own artificially altered state. This in turn leads to a focus on Loki, who, despite his penchant for transformation, here appears to be uncomplicatedly male, a state corroborated by the fact that his genitals apparently survive the ordeal intact, thus proving that they are firmly attached to the rest of his body. The final action, with which Loki falls into Skaði's lap, acts as a resolution of sorts, and it is interesting to note that the placement of something in the main character's lap was also the action that brought *Þrymskviða* to a successful conclusion. In the case of Þórr, the placement of the hammer in his lap was a transformative action: with the phallic implement back in its rightful place, the effect of the female disguise was negated and a newly re-masculinised Þórr returned to his habitual behaviour. Given the numerous structural similarities between *Þrymskviða* and Skaði's bridal quest, the question is naturally raised as to whether something similar is occurring in the final action of each story: in essence, a question must be raised as to how euphemistically the phrase *Þá lét Loki fallast í kné Skaða* 'then Loki let himself drop into

⁴⁸⁸ See Clunies Ross (1994a) 123 and Lindow (1992) 135.

Skaði's lap' can be interpreted. Given that Loki has just proved the sturdiness of his genitalia in a tug of war contest, his finding his way into Skaði's lap potentially conveys a suggestion of sexual activity.⁴⁸⁹

The extent to which one can read sexual implications into Loki's fall into Skaði's lap is dependent on exactly how the situation might be imagined. If Loki, with his genitals exposed and, we might imagine, engorged as result of his tug-of-war, falls forwards into Skaði's lap, then penetration is a possibility. If, however, he falls backwards into Skaði's lap, then an entirely different image is created, one in which the giantess in her masculine garb could potentially appear to have an naked penis rising from the correct anatomical location in a manner not dissimilar to the placement of the hammer in Freyja-Þórr's lap. From a gender perspective, the ambiguity of the language describing this situation makes it unclear as to exactly what element of Skaði's characterisation is being emphasised: one reading serves to confirm her essential female nature, the other to further support the maleness of the role she has adopted. One factor that supports the first of these readings, however, is that the existence of sexual relations between Loki and Skaði is asserted by the former in *Lokasenna*, albeit with the usual caveat that Loki's words might not be trustworthy.⁴⁹⁰ If there is a sexual element to Loki falling into Skaði's lap, then in a sense it fulfils the same purpose as the replacement of the hammer in *Þrymskviða*: Skaði is finally fully stripped of her masculine aspect through engagement in a normative heterosexual encounter with a figure who has just gone to violent lengths to prove his masculinity. With her feminine role thus confirmed, Skaði's threat is entirely dissipated: she has been successfully and completely defined as a woman, rather than as a dangerous trans-gender individual.

⁴⁸⁹ McKinnell (1987-8) 254.

⁴⁹⁰ 'Lokasenna' 52. Skaði's role in *Lokasenna* will be discussed shortly.

Skáldskaparmál does not give any indication of how Njörðr or Skaði feel about their surprise marriage, nor indeed pass any comment on its success. The sometimes strained relationship between them is, however, referenced briefly across a variety of sources with remarkable consistency.⁴⁹¹ The most notable of these comes from *Gylfaginning*, in which Snorri devotes a substantial amount of his description of Njörðr's nature to discussing the god's marital difficulties.⁴⁹² Supported by the quotation of two stanzas of unspecified origin, the essential incompatibility of the two figures is highlighted through their mutual abhorrence of each other's permanent abode;⁴⁹³ Skaði, a creature of rocks and mountains, is appalled by Njörðr's coastal dwelling, and the sea-god in turn is repulsed by the wolf-ridden desolation of her house. Following an unsuccessful attempt to alternate between these two homes, Skaði returns permanently to the mountains in what must be taken as an implicit separation. This use of landscapes as symbolic of the essential tension between husband and wife is here used to great effect (and has possible implications for our understanding of the sometimes tumultuous marriage of Óðinn and Frigg, as discussed in 2.2.2.). Some kind of geographical opposition can also be seen to be implied in *Skírnismál*, at least in terms of the emphasis that the poem places on the danger and difficulty of travelling between the two separate worlds in which the poem takes place: Freyr and Gerðr, it is made clear, are children of very different spaces. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri provides evidence for this view:

Varð sjálf sonar–

nama snotr una–

Kjalarr of tamði–

kváðut Hamði–

–Goðrún bani

⁴⁹¹ See Clunies Ross (1994a) 125 for a summary of these.

⁴⁹² *Gylfaginning* (2005) 23-4.

⁴⁹³ Lindow (2001) 241.

–goðbrúðr Vani

–heldr vel mara

–hjørleik spara.

Hér er þess getit er Skaði gekk frá Nirði sem fyrr er ritat.

[Guðrún herself became the killer of her son; the wise god-bride (Skaði) could not be content with the Van; Kjalarr tamed horses rather well; they did not declare Hamðir to have spared the swordplay.

Here is related how Skaði left Njörðr, as was previously written.]⁴⁹⁴

Snorri attributes this stanza to the eleventh-century Icelandic skald Þórðr Sjáreksson, which if true suggests the idea of Skaði and Njörðr's marriage as a failure is a long-established one. This stanza, and Snorri's use of it, do however raise some vital questions as to exactly how deeply this idea is entrenched. Even if one accepts that the kenning used here does in fact signify Skaði, Þórðr does not elucidate the details: so obscure is the reference that Snorri feels compelled to give an overt explanation for it. The focus on incompatible geographical locations is not evident in Þórðr's verse, and thus in some sense Snorri is forcing his own meaning on to his historical evidence: indeed, it is worth noting that the idea of Skaði and Njörðr separating seems to exist only in Snorri's writing. Nothing in eddic poetry suggests the split, albeit that Skaði is never the focus of any eddic poem. In *Lokasenna*, her appearance in which will be discussed in detail below, she takes a dignified position at a meeting of the gods at which she is, unlike her fellow outsider Loki, clearly welcome;⁴⁹⁵ in the brief prologue to *Skírnismál*, she appears as a concerned and loving stepmother to Freyr.⁴⁹⁶ *Grímnismál* describes two separate habitations for Skaði and Njörðr, but there is nothing to suggest that they have retreated from one another: indeed, the description of Skaði in that poem as *skír brúðr goða* 'the gods' shining bride' seems to

⁴⁹⁴ *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 18.

⁴⁹⁵ 'Lokasenna' 49-52.

⁴⁹⁶ 'Fyr Skírnis' 1.

imply the opposite view.⁴⁹⁷ Even if Skaði has separated from Njörðr, this description shows that she still occupies a favoured place in divine society, and depending on how *brúðr* is to be interpreted she is potentially still be characterised as the bride that the gods transformed her into. There does, therefore, seem to be an agenda on Snorri's part whereby he plays up the idea of acrimony between god and giantess, a desire to portray female figures whose power to cause destruction and social anxieties is deflected but not dissipated, and whose achievements and benefits are downplayed.⁴⁹⁸ Njörðr, second-class god and perpetual hostage, in essence becomes in Snorri's version the gods' patsy, taking upon himself the troubled marriage that might have plagued the more socially important Baldr.

Whilst Snorri may be emphasising the negative qualities of this, it is noteworthy that, like Freyr's marriage to Gerðr, Skaði's union with Njörðr does not seem to produce any children. It is generally accepted that Loki's insult in *Lokasenna*, corroborated by the euhemerised account of the Vanir in *Ynglinga saga*, that Njörðr has fathered Freyr and Freyja on his own un-named sister is correct.⁴⁹⁹ The Vanir, furthermore, are closely associated with the concept of incest.⁵⁰⁰ Seen in the light of *Skírnismál*, the unproductive aspect of Njörðr and Skaði's marriage can be seen to fit into a larger recurring narrative trope, whereby the appearance of an external and empowered woman can lead, not to the nurturing and support of a prominent male's dynastic potential, but to its suppression. This is particularly emphasised through Skaði's forceful and domineering personality, an explicit expression of the same implicit resistance and independence of mind that one can see lying beneath Gerðr's words; Njörðr is, by contrast, a passive figure who seems unable to exert his will over his new and independent wife, a facet of their relationship

⁴⁹⁷ 'Grímnismál' 11. See also 'Grímnismál' 16 for its description of Njörðr's abode.

⁴⁹⁸ Jochens (1996) 80-3.

⁴⁹⁹ See, for example, Lindow (2001) 242 and Simek (1993) 90-1.

⁵⁰⁰ Dronke (1988) 227.

exemplified by Snorri's account of their inability to deal with each other's abodes. Though Njörðr is genetically productive he is nevertheless forced to father bastards, even if they are high-ranking and respected bastards: in the figure of his legitimate but alien wife, Njörðr finds no hope of producing children, and Snorri's accounts in particular are clear in conveying a sense of moral disapproval concerning his incestuous activities.⁵⁰¹ Skaði may have accepted being tricked into taking the identity of a wife, but she never takes on the role of a biological mother (although we have seen her as loving step-mother in *Skírnismál*): even if she does come to be, broadly, on the side of the gods, she does not act to continue their genetic lines.

Skaði's involvement in *Lokasenna*, however, is worth considering, in particular her relationship with Loki. Her conduct towards him in the bridal quest episode of *Skáldskaparmál* suggests that their relationship is close and convivial: not only does she laugh at his antics, but his falling into her lap, however that action may be interpreted, represents the closest physical relationship she has with a member of divine society that is actually described in the extant literature, although we are presumably intended to assume that Skaði and Njörðr have a sexual relationship before they separate. This implied empathy between Skaði and Loki, in part, is understandable: Skaði is a being much like Loki, a creature of the outside that has undergone a partially-transformative initiation into a new social circle. If, furthermore, the suggestion of sexual relations between them is a valid reading then it adds a whole new level of intimacy and connection between the two figures.

Skaði's antipathy towards Loki in *Lokasenna* is, consequently, not only profoundly violent, but contrary to her earlier positive reception of him. Indeed, the particular vehemence of her attacks have been noted, and been read as indicative of her 'blunt, coarse

⁵⁰¹ Jochens (1995) 23.

giantess fashion.’⁵⁰² Her changed opinion of Loki matches what may be seen as a reversal in situation: Skaði may be a giantess, but she is now the integrated outsider conforming to an accepted social identity whereas Loki lies on the liminal edge of society, approaching his inevitable exit from it in a way that mirrors to her irresistible entry into it. This is an important factor: just as Loki the pseudo-outsider was the active force that propelled Skaði into divine society, so too here does the pseudo-outsider giantess act as the force that secures his propulsion from divine society. As McKinnell has noted, Skaði’s words constitute a direct and irrevocable threat, sweeping aside and supplanting all previous attempts at reconciliation.⁵⁰³ It is important that it is Skaði who precipitates this movement outwards: as an outsider like Loki she is not so bound by the sanctity of the hall, and thus she alone in this assembly is empowered to make a world-changing decision; her unique position gives her alone the opportunity to ‘break the pattern’ that lies at the heart of the exchanges in *Lokasenna*.⁵⁰⁴ In essence, Skaði empowers herself to curse Loki by defining herself as one whose history gives her the opportunity to transgress social rules. Given that Baldr is dead by this point in the internal chronology of Norse myth, an irrevocable breach with Loki will be another step towards *ragnarök*, and to some extent one can see Skaði as the figure who begins it: her final assertion that *frá mínom véom ok vǫngom skolo/ þér æ kǫld ráð koma* ‘from my sanctuaries and meadows there shall always come cold counsels for you’ is an uncompromising and belligerent declaration of open hostility, the first of its kind in the poem.⁵⁰⁵

To some extent, then, Skaði can be seen as having lived up to the eschatological promise of her masculine appearance in *Skáldskaparmál*, even if it has been achieved in an unexpected manner. Whilst Loki, and ultimately the gods themselves, are culpable for their

⁵⁰² McKinnell (1987-8) 254.

⁵⁰³ McKinnell (1987-8) 254.

⁵⁰⁴ Jesch (1991) 141.

⁵⁰⁵ ‘Lokasenna’ 51.

own destruction, the figure of the alien woman becomes the means by which that destruction is achieved. It may be that some element of lingering resentment concerning Skaði's belligerent and threatening temperament can be seen in the immediate response to her final threat to Loki: it is Sif who speaks next, but the previous pattern of one god moving to defend the figure under attack by Loki is broken.⁵⁰⁶ Sif's comments do not relate to Skaði at all, being self-oriented and self-serving: they relate only to the other gods in the respect that her attempt to charm Loki could postpone the inevitable conflict. This places Skaði in a unique social position within the poem: every other deity insulted either provides their own defence or is defended by someone else, or else the non-specific comments of the interrupter can be seen to relate to some aspect of the god under attack, which means that Skaði alone is left undefended. It is a subtle aspect to the poem that serves further to identify Skaði with Loki: whilst she is pivotal in confirming Loki's rejection by divine society, there is an undercurrent of that society's rejection of Skaði as well. Both outsiders remain outsiders, and though this empowers them to flout the norms of the society to which they uneasily belong, it nevertheless implicitly supports and enforces the outsider role that society has defined for them. The status that gives Skaði the power to be the first figure truly to reject Loki remains an indicator of her original heritage.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Skaði and Gerðr have significant overlaps, and are markedly differentiated from what I have termed the 'domestic' goddesses of the divine social circle. The process by which they come into that society is demonstrably problematised, and it is furthermore imperfect: they remain somehow outsiders, a state of being that seems inextricably tied up with their female gender and the female roles they fulfil. They remain independent and assertive in a manner that destabilises the workings of patriarchal society to such an extent that they carry a hint of eschatological significance; this seems to be characteristic of their particular stock character type. In essence, Gerðr and

⁵⁰⁶ 'Lokasenna' 53.

Skaði prove the rule that whilst for the gods alien concubines are acceptable, alien marriage is not.⁵⁰⁷ The next section will address a third external female who has entered into the society of the Æsir, and one who has had a supremely influential impact on the literature as a whole.

⁵⁰⁷ Clunies Ross (1994a) 65.

2.4. Freyja

2.4.1. Introduction

The Vanir goddess Freyja is the single most important and influential female figure in the entire corpus of Norse mythology.⁵⁰⁸ She also has the most exposure in the extant literature, outstripping even Frigg: though Freyja only has one legend in which she is the main protagonist, recounted in the eddic poem *Hyndluljóð*, she nevertheless plays an important supporting role in a number of other myths recounted in other eddic poems, *Snorra Edda*, and various mythological sagas. As a consequence of this exposure a great deal of scholarly attention has been focused on Freyja, and there are numerous theories concerning her nature and function; particular attention has been paid to her function as a fertility deity, and the probable importance of that in terms of her historic worship.⁵⁰⁹ One of the most persistent traditional theories is that at some point Freyja and Frigg were synonymous, a theory that does much to explain how an interloping goddess of the second-class Vanir has somehow managed to challenge Óðinn's legitimate and regal wife for the position of the most important of the Ásynjur.⁵¹⁰ The present study, however, will take Freyja and Frigg to be separate figures, as the extant literature either states or infers.

Freyja's character, as interpreted by the male figures that surround her, generally conforms to three distinct archetypal figures: that of the witch, the whore, and the aristocrat. It is important to note that these three roles are not definitions provided by Freyja herself, but as will be seen are artificial identities generated by the male characters as means of giving definition to Freyja's complex character. There is, of course, a degree of overlap between these, with various facets of her personality forming part of a

⁵⁰⁸ Simek (1993) 90.

⁵⁰⁹ For example, Ellis Davidson (1998) and Shaw (2011) are two relatively recent book-length studies devoted to the concept of the northern fertility goddess; a full list of scholarly texts addressing this idea would be immense.

⁵¹⁰ For a useful summary of this well established debate and its central arguments, see Ingunn Ásdísardóttir (2006).

consistent characterisation across the mythology as a whole. Her sexual desirability, for example, could be seen as inimical to all three of the archetypal figures suggested above. Whilst this present study will be making a division between these three constructed roles, therefore, it will also take a holistic view.

2.4.2. Freyja as Witch

Freyja has a strong association with magical abilities, and specifically with the practice of *seiðr*. In *Ynglinga saga*, it is a euhemerised Freyja that first introduces the power of *seiðr* to Óðinn and his fellow Æsir, and who thereafter officiates as a priestess at sacrificial rites.⁵¹¹ In the context of eddic literature, if Freyja is indeed synonymous with the figures of Gullveig and Heiðr in *Völuspá*, a matter that will be addressed shortly, then she performs a similar role in that literature as well: she is not only a powerful practitioner of *seiðr*, but also the figure who introduces it into the universe.⁵¹² It would seem, furthermore, that in terms of her real-world worship, Freyja's witch-persona was a major facet of her cult.⁵¹³

Despite the apparent strength of Freyja's magical prowess, supernatural acts are surprisingly uncommon and underplayed in stories where she has a large degree of independent agency. In *Hyndluljóð*, for example, Freyja makes only two fleeting references to her magical practices: she threatens Hyndla with fire and a magic potion, two relatively understated manifestations of supernatural power that are not enacted and are mentioned only to rebuff a similar threat on the giantess's part.⁵¹⁴ Freyja chooses to use guile rather than magical force to secure the information she needs from the giantess, despite the fact that the casual manner in which she brushes off Hyndla's magical threat

⁵¹¹ *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 12-3.

⁵¹² 'Völuspá' 21-2.

⁵¹³ Mitchell (2011) 29. Mitchell also suggests that many of Freyja's positive qualities may have been transferred to the figure of the Virgin Mary.

⁵¹⁴ 'Hyndluljóð' 48 & 50 respectively.

suggests that she is secure in the belief that she has magical dominance over the other female. If the power dynamic here is indeed lopsided and weighted in Freyja's favour, then it is interesting that Freyja's threats of magical fire and counter-spell potions are reserved for the end of the poem; instead of opting for these implicitly easier methods of threatening Hyndla, Freyja chooses the more difficult task of trying to cajole the giantess into acquiescence through verbal dexterity. The implication seems to be that whilst Freyja possesses magical powers of a substantial magnitude she is disinclined to use them, at least until the diplomatic approach has failed.

The only other story in which Freyja has a relatively independent role is the late *Sörla þáttur*.⁵¹⁵ Freyja's activities in this poem can be divided into two parts: her actions in initially obtaining her famous necklace Brísingamen, and then her further actions in trying to ransom it back from Óðinn. Once again, the magical elements of Freyja's arsenal are not introduced into the narrative until a late stage. To obtain the necklace from the dwarves who have created it she first offers them financial reward, and when they turn this down she offers them her sexual favours, which they accept.⁵¹⁶ Freyja's prostitution annoys Óðinn, who commissions Loki to steal the necklace for him.⁵¹⁷ This reflects Óðinn's usual practice, and that of the male Æsir more generally, in exercising control over female sexuality, as has been discussed previously (in 1.3.2. and 1.3.3.). This situation also echoes the episode of Frigg and the golden idol from *Gesta Danorum* (see 2.2.2.): it represents a female figure close to Óðinn who is willing to use sex, without male direction or permission, as a means to economic power, a liberty of self-independence which must not go unpunished. In *Sörla þáttur*, this punishment takes the form of Óðinn ransoming the necklace as a means of re-establishing his control over Freyja. It is interesting that it is he who introduces the element of Freyja's magic, commanding her to use her powers to serve

⁵¹⁵ The text exists only in the late fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*. See Lindow (2001) 280-1.

⁵¹⁶ 'Sörla þáttur eða Heðins saga ok Högna' (1954) 367-8.

⁵¹⁷ 'Sörla þáttur' 368-9.

his purpose.⁵¹⁸ It is also important to note that the form of magic that Óðinn requires Freyja to perform is a type of mass mind-control, which she goes on to do with great effect by enchanting two kings and their armies.⁵¹⁹ Taken as a whole, the movement from an independently active Freyja to a subserviently active Freyja has some profound implications: instead of bewitching the dwarves with her demonstrably powerful ability to subvert masculine self-governance, she chooses to use her body in a manner that is perceived as degrading and dishonourable to a patriarchal power. She resists the use of her own supernatural powers until she is forced, blackmailed in fact, into using them by a male figure. Indeed, Óðinn seems more interested and invested in her powers than the goddess herself is. Both *Hyndluljóð* and *Sörla þáttur* portray a Freyja who has considerable power but chooses not to use it unless in extreme circumstances, but who possesses considerable sexual charm and independence, something that seems unacceptable to Óðinn.

The disparity between Freyja's use of her own powers, and the desire of a male figure near to her to use them vicariously, in these two sources is indicative of a wider pattern in the extant mythological literature. Freyja may be a great practitioner of the magic art, perhaps the greatest, but within the literature she is not shown to use it except at the behest of a male figure: indeed, she is most often characterised as a source or repository of magical power to be accessed at will. An emblematic example of this is Freyja's famous feather-cloak, the wearing of which gives the bearer the power to fly.⁵²⁰ Despite being referenced in several myths, this garment is never seen being worn by its owner in any extant literature: it is, instead, often loaned out to a male god, usually Loki, for their use and at their need.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁸ 'Sörla þáttur' 369-70.

⁵¹⁹ 'Sörla þáttur' 376-82.

⁵²⁰ Price (2002) 108.

⁵²¹ For example, in 'Prymskviða' 3-5 and *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 2.

Freyja's magic is valuable in its own right, but the implication is that it gains in value when it comes under direct male control. In *Ynglinga saga* it may be that Freyja is the originator of *seiðr* amongst the Æsir, but the narrative focus is clearly on Óðinn's acquisition and use of this art, and it is to his various powers that Snorri devotes far more of his attention than he does to Freyja's magical function.⁵²² If Price is correct in his assertion that this lengthy discourse represents a lost stanza of *Ynglingatal*, then one could infer that there was a strong focus on Óðinn's use of the power he derived from Freyja, rather than on the quality of Freyja's powers themselves, from a very early stage.⁵²³

All this literary evidence combined suggests that Freyja, despite her powerful magical abilities, is not primarily characterised as a practitioner of *seiðr* and its related arts, but rather as an enabler, a go-to source of miscellaneous magic for the gods to call upon at need. In a sense this casts Freyja in a benign role: she is a facilitator whose special abilities can be called upon to serve the greater benefit of the tribe. The *Sörla þáttur* account, however, casts a more negative light on the situation: Freyja must be forced to use her magical abilities against her will. In this context, her reticence about using her magical powers in her solo adventures can have several interpretations: perhaps it is an unwillingness to abuse such a powerful tool, or a respect for the natural order of things that supernatural interference inevitably upsets. Whatever the reason, there seems to be a clear disparity between the male Æsir's frequent and flagrant use of magic, and Freyja's cautious restraint. If it is the male gods who construct this identity of Freyja as a source or repository of magical powers, so too is it implied that they are in some sense abusing that identity.

This idea of Freyja as an unwilling provider of magical power is particularly meaningful if she can be viewed as synonymous with the figures of Gullveig and Heiðr

⁵²² *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 17-20.

⁵²³ Price (2002) 70-1.

who appear in *Völuspá*. Though mentioned only in *Völuspá*, Gullveig is unlikely to be simply an invention of the author of that poem.⁵²⁴ Many scholars have argued that Gullveig, Heiðr and Freyja are to be understood as a single figure, though this reading is by no means uncontested.⁵²⁵ If Freyja is indeed Gullveig/Heiðr, and the evidence for this viewpoint is compelling, then the idea of the desirability of Freyja's magical power, and the concept of bending it to male need, takes a prominent place in the ordering of the entire mythic universe; it also renders Freyja a figure of profound eschatological significance.

Gullveig and Heiðr are described in the following two stanzas of *Völuspá*:

‘Þat man hon fólkvig fyrst í heimi,
er Gullveigo geirom studdo
ok í holl Hárs hána brendo,
þrysvar brendo, þrysvar borna,
opt, ósialdan; þó hon enn lifir.

Heiði hana héto, hvars til húsa kom,
vǫlo vel spáa, vitti hon ganda;
seið hon, hvars hon kunni, seið hon hug leikinn,
æ var hon angan illrar brúðar.’

[‘She remembers that war, the first in the world, when they propped up Gullveig with spears and burnt her in Hár's hall: thrice they burnt her, thrice born, often, over again; yet she still lives.

⁵²⁴ Clunies Ross (1994a) 200.

⁵²⁵ Amongst those who support the theory that they are all the same figure are Jochens (1996) 66, Clunies Ross (1994a) 198-211 and Turville-Petre (1964) 159. On the other hand, Mundal (2002) 191-2 argues that Gullveig is a giant, while Dronke (1988) 229-30 argues that Gullveig may in fact be the name of an idol representing Freyja, and posits an interesting comparison between the treatment of Gullveig and the idols of Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr in various sources. John McKinnell (2005) argues that only Gullveig is synonymous with Freyja, and in McKinnell (2001) 5-7 he argues the figure of Heiðr is conceivably a separate entity, and is possibly synonymous with the figure of the *völva* herself. In summary, while the connection between these figures is ambiguous, the consensus of opinion is that some connection definitely exists.

They called her *Heiðr* wherever she came to houses, a truly prophetic *völva*, she enchanted magic staves; she worked magic wherever she could, she charmed a bewitched mind, she was always the delight of an evil woman.’]⁵²⁶

There is a great deal of information in these two stanzas, the details of which can be difficult to pick out. The unifying theme of the two stanzas is the focus on the nebulous ‘they’, the impersonal assemblage who assault Gullveig and name *Heiðr*, and for whom the most obvious identity is that of the *Æsir* gathered there. By laying emphasis on them as the active agents in the events that follow in each stanza, the *völva* draws attention to the manner in which the male reception of female action is ascribed greater importance than female action itself. This focus on the phallocentric viewpoint highlights the extent to which Freyja/Gullveig/*Heiðr*’s nature is created and defined by external influences: in the first stanza her actions are a reaction to the violence that she receives from the male gods, whilst in the second stanza her actions are prefigured by the initial act of naming her. In a sense, ‘they’ are responsible for creating a new identity for the same female figure in both stanzas, changing the manner in which her nature can be viewed.

Gullveig’s importance, or perhaps more accurately the importance of her reception, is underscored by the role she plays in the first war in the world. It is notable that the entry of women into the world is full of negative associations: the world becomes a ‘darker and more regretful’ place with the introduction of women.⁵²⁷ Whilst Gullveig is the catalyst for war, however, she is not herself the active cause of it; rather, the implication seems to be that the war is fought over her.⁵²⁸ This is emphasised by the *völva*’s earlier description of a world that is initially at peace before the coming of women, and by the fact that the second

⁵²⁶ ‘*Vǫluspá*’ 21-2.

⁵²⁷ Lönnroth (2002) 18. More recently, Johansson (2013) 177 has argued against this, stating that it is ‘not obvious’ that the peace in *Völuspá* is broken by the arrival of women into the world – whilst it is true that the poem does not explicitly state that women are the cause of conflict, it is nevertheless implicitly suggested by the suddenness with which war breaks out in the world following their appearance, and so ultimately I take Lönnroth’s line on this matter.

⁵²⁸ Price (2002) 108 offers an alternative view, arguing that the existence of Freyja’s sorcery is, in and of itself, a malevolent factor that leads to war.

conflict in the world, described in stanza 25, is explicitly related to who had control of Freyja. Once again in Norse mythological literature, access to a female figure is contested by two patriarchal tribes, which seek to harness, for personal use, her life-giving or power-bestowing attributes. Clunies Ross has argued that it is necessary for the gods to destroy Gullveig to repudiate what she stands for;⁵²⁹ the main issue expressed in *Völuspá* 21-2, however, seems to be an anxiety about laying claim to her power for male use, rather than eradicating it.

This sense of the taking of female power for male use is symbolically demonstrated in the manner in which Gullveig is attacked in *Völuspá* 21. The act of piercing Gullveig with spears signifies the sexual dominance of the woman by multiple penetrative acts with phallic weaponry. The importance of weapons in establishing the male right of authority over the female cannot be overstated: as Kress would have it, ‘In order to conquer women (and the feminine) men have to make alliances, and they need weapons.’⁵³⁰ There are also sinister overtones in the poet’s choice of the word *studdo*, from the verb *styðja*. This unusual word normally carries a variety of meanings that suggest the action of supporting or holding something up, and is consequently unusual in the context of violence.⁵³¹ The mental image subsequently created is of Gullveig’s body held upright by a sort of scaffolding of spears, so many of which have pierced her that the body does not fall to the ground. Not only is this an intensely violent and, given the sexual connotations of the act, misogynistic image, but it also has troubling implications in terms of the power dynamics on display: Gullveig’s ability to stand on her own is taken from her, so that her body stands only by male agency. She is transformed into a puppet, kept erect by phallic implements: the seizure of her power, consequently, can be seen to symbolically reduce her body to the

⁵²⁹ Clunies Ross (1994a) 210.

⁵³⁰ Kress (2002) 83.

⁵³¹ Zoëga (2004) 414.

status of inert trophy. Gullveig loses her role as an independent sorceress, and simply becomes an inanimate tool of sorcery held fast by symbols of masculinity.

Gullveig's only active function within these two stanzas is her ability to survive this torment, and her subsequent immolation, by rebirthing herself.⁵³² This action not only lays emphasis on the extent of Gullveig's magical power, which is able to overcome death, but hints at the reason for her becoming an objective of war. It is a power that the military might of the Æsir is unable to overcome, and the gods' desire to acquire Gullveig's power can be seen as a natural cause of the conflict, particularly when considered in the wider context of Norse myth that the *völva* goes on to relate: despite being at the centre of the first conflict, Gullveig is able to rise again, but Óðinn, at the last conflict, *ragnarök*, will not.⁵³³ Price sees Gullveig's power of rebirth as a natural extension of Óðinn's power of killing, which if they were allied into a single being would allow for the survival of the present society of gods.⁵³⁴ An alternative reading, however, would be to see the relationship between these two powers as a contest for dominance and individual control: is it any wonder that a god such as Óðinn, whose obsession with his own mortality spans the entirety of mythic history and is evident in the conceit of *Völuspá* itself, should covet such a power as Gullveig has? Óðinn's command of death, coupled with Gullveig's power of eternal rebirth, would ensure the primacy and survival of both him and the patriarchal society he represents, but importantly they would survive on his terms alone.⁵³⁵

There is an ironic echo of this in the fact that one aspect of Óðinn's attempt to master Gullveig involves burning her, an act which parallels the burning of Baldr; it should be noted that burning was not the usual way of executing witches in medieval

⁵³² Dronke (1988) 229 alternatively argues that the 'death' and 'rebirth' of Gullveig by fire represents her golden idol being melted down and reformed – an interesting idea that relates to Freyja's economic function, which will be discussed below in 2.4.4.

⁵³³ 'Völuspá' 53.

⁵³⁴ Price (2002) 363.

⁵³⁵ Mundal (2002) 193 argues that the half-burnt female heart consumed by Loki in *Völuspá in skamma* is Gullveig's, and the fact that it causes Loki to give birth to the race of trolls serves to demonstrate how powerful Gullveig's power of birth can be when used to serve the purposes of chaos against the gods.

Scandinavia.⁵³⁶ The connection between Gullveig and Baldr's pyre is further emphasised by the presence, at Baldr's funeral, of the troll-woman Hyrrokkin, whose name means 'wrinkled by fire'.⁵³⁷ Here are two supernatural women who have been burnt, and who have come back.⁵³⁸ It is an ability that the princely Baldr, and by extension the patriarchal society whose continuation is dependent on his existence, is unable to match.⁵³⁹ Óðinn's attempt to redefine Gullveig as an inert tool for his own use is rendered unsuccessful by the nature of her power itself: due to her ability to rebirth herself, she is able to prevent her redefined nature from being permanent.

In the next stanza, *Völuspá* 22, the Gullveig figure is named Heiðr, and a different perspective on her magical power is presented.⁵⁴⁰ She has gone from being the goddess at the centre of a cosmic conflict to being a figure in the pattern of the traditional image of the itinerant *völva* whose setting is a domestic one (and will be discussed in 3.4.3.). This is an important transition in terms of understanding the full scope of what Freyja's introduction of *seiðr* to the world means: it represents a refocusing of the uses and implications of *seiðr* from a macrocosmic to a microcosmic scale; whilst *seiðr* and its female user are capable of causing great disruption on the grand stage of divine warfare, they are equally capable of fermenting strife in the domestic circle of an individual habitation. Whether this is the habitation of gods or humans is unclear, but largely irrelevant: what is important is that the 'association between females and evil is unambiguous' in the domestic setting.⁵⁴¹ This

⁵³⁶ Motz (1993b) 82.

⁵³⁷ The *völva* herself makes reference to Baldr's death in stanzas 31-3. For the etymology of Hyrrokkin's name, and potential explanations for its relevance, see Lindow (1997) 88.

⁵³⁸ Mundal (2002) 192 argues that whilst Gullveig cannot be seen as synonymous with Freyja, she may well in fact be the same figure as Hyrrokkin.

⁵³⁹ McKinnell (2005) 89 suggests that being attacked by fire is a common theme amongst supernatural women; I think, however, that the similarities to Baldr's case are too well-matched to simply be coincidental.

⁵⁴⁰ The name occurs in other literature to denote supernatural women; see McKinnell (2001) 395-8 for a summary of these. It is worth noting that McKinnell argues for viewing Heiðr as a figure distinct from Freyja/Gullveig; whilst I am not taking that line here, the fact that the name of this figure is used of several other witches in Old Norse literature supports my assertion that the Heiðr of *Völuspá* represents a sort of prototypical witch.

⁵⁴¹ Jochens (1989) 353.

stanza is also important insofar as it casts the Freyja-figure in a more obviously negative light: however passive her function as the catalyst for divine war might have been, here she is clearly an active agent with a capacity for malicious action.

The image of Heiðr as a domestic witch, causing trouble in the home, becomes a signifier of her evil power and its disruptive potential, and she is in some sense the prototypical witch of Norse mythology; as Mitchell puts it, ‘witches were surely not the only sort of evil women medieval Scandinavians knew, but they became the prototypical evil women of that world.’⁵⁴² The Heiðr stanza seems to establish a significant division along gender lines: just as it is the nebulous ‘they’ who are evident in the use of *héto* ‘they called’ that appear in the first half-line of the stanza and are perhaps intended to represent the prevailing phallogocentric viewpoint of medieval human society, it is the definitely female *ill brúðr* ‘evil woman’ who closes the stanza in the last half-line. This distinction is particularly emphasised by the poem’s use of the word *brúðr*, which can be used as a generic term for any woman but more specifically refers to a woman who is married, and thus of necessity part of a social and domestic circle that includes a male figure.⁵⁴³ It suggests a sense of gender conflict that is present here: this female power is rendered most troubling by that fact that it is entirely within the control of the *brúðar*, and the men present are subject to it rather than masters over it.⁵⁴⁴ The poet uses the phrase *seið hon hug leikinn* ‘she charmed a bewitched mind’ to describe the way in which Heiðr manipulates the minds of men; *leikinn* is the past participle of the verb *leika* ‘to play’, the use of which in *Hávamál* 155 was discussed in section 1.3.2., where it was also used to describe the action of witches. In that poem, it was argued the use of this verb suggested that the witches were unaware of Óðinn’s presence, and that his assault upon them was

⁵⁴² Mitchell (2011) 180.

⁵⁴³ Zoëga (2004) 73.

⁵⁴⁴ McKinnell (2001) 402-4 shows that the term *brúðr* has negative connotations in a several other eddic poems. See also McKinnell (2005) 81-5 for the use of the term with regards to the complex and troubling character of Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr.

consequently from a position of concealment; a similar, though not identical, usage may be being suggested by the use of the related word *leikinn* in *Völuspá*, for although there is an element of aggressiveness in the act of bewitching the mind of another, in this context it conveys a sense of carelessness, as if this female power and its users do not feel the need to acknowledge masculine prerogative of any kind.⁵⁴⁵ Heiðr's magic might be damaging to men, but it hardly seems to be cast here as an organised and determined anti-patriarchal force. There is consequently a sense that it is the implicitly patriarchal 'they' responsible for naming Heiðr who create the sense of conflict, who force a scenario of one side against the other; Freyja/Gullveig/Heiðr might be capricious and even possibly malicious, but it is the male gaze that characterises her as both a military target and a domestic enemy.

In conclusion, the overall depiction of Freyja as a witch-figure seems dependent on a form of male characterisation; she is identified as a witch by others, but does not herself seem overly dependent on that identity in her own independent adventures. In *Völuspá* her magic has profound implications for the unity of human and human-like society, and for the end of the world; in a poem that is already steeped in Christian imagery, the figure of Freyja-as-witch has a similar function to that of Eve and Original Sin.⁵⁴⁶ Gullveig represents, as Clunies Ross terms it, an 'ineradicable principle'.⁵⁴⁷ Disruption enters the world through female agency, but becomes the overwhelming concern of male figures: it is the males who obsess over it, and who seek to master it. The attack on Gullveig can at the very least be seen, as McKinnell has argued, as the first event that moves the world towards *ragnarök*.⁵⁴⁸ Freyja/Gullveig/Heiðr ultimately reacts to male action, and it is the

⁵⁴⁵ Dronke (1988) 228 offers an alternative interpretation of this term in suggesting that Heiðr is acting as a medium by allowing spirits to 'play' through her. An interesting reading, but one that clearly does not stand up for the witches in *Hávamál*.

⁵⁴⁶ John McKinnell has demonstrated that the impact of Christian thinking on the poem has been major. See McKinnell (2008) for a summary.

⁵⁴⁷ Clunies Ross (1994a) 98.

⁵⁴⁸ McKinnell (2001) 394

male figures who constantly attempt to place a specific and self-serving definition on her; it is this action that ultimately dooms male society.

2.4.3. Freyja as Whore

More than any other member of the Ásynjur, Freyja enjoys a reputation for sexual promiscuity.⁵⁴⁹ The sense of her sexual desirability and her arbitration of whether or not to grant her sexual favours form some element of every narrative situation in which she features. Despite the uniformity of Freyja's reputation for sexual license, as seen by her fellow gods and modern scholars, a close examination of the literary evidence may in fact suggest that this reputation is exaggerated. Only one text, the late-dated *Sörla þátttr*, actually portrays Freyja offering herself sexually for personal material enrichment; it is certainly no worse a kind of prostitution than the extramarital activities undertaken by Frigg in the *Gesta Danorum*, or her implied affair in *Ynglinga saga*, nor indeed is it any worse than the feminised Loki's seduction of the stallion Svaðilfari. In spite of *Sörla þátttr* being the only extant direct literary evidence for Freyja prostituting herself, she is nevertheless associated more strongly with a sense of promiscuity than any other female or sometimes-female figure. Some sources hint at her sexual adventurousness: little is done to deny the charges of gross promiscuity and incest levelled against her in *Lokasenna*, and her relationship with Óttarr in *Hyndluljóð* has overtones of sex, but these relations are not directly witnessed and the allegations are based on hearsay from unreliable sources. There is a titillating suggestion of orgiastic practices surrounding Freyja's reception of her half of the slain to her hall of Fólkvangr, but this is never explicitly substantiated by the texts that describe her abode;⁵⁵⁰ in order to come to the conclusion that Freyja is having sex with her

⁵⁴⁹ Turville-Petre (1964) 176-7.

⁵⁵⁰ For all textual mentions of Fólkvangr, see Simek (1993) 87.

warriors, the reader is required to have a preconceived idea of her sexual generosity and practices.⁵⁵¹

The accusations of promiscuity and incest brought against Freyja in *Lokasenna* aptly demonstrate the extent to which a figure's sexual reputation is dependent not on a direct witnessing of sexual activity, but on the discussion of it within a public sphere.⁵⁵² The validity or otherwise of Loki's accusation hardly matters: his intention is to undermine the assembled goddesses by constructing for them the identity of a group of women who are willing to give their sexual favours for self-gratification or economic gain with no consideration for the shame that may accompany such acts in the society depicted. Loki's tactic, with Freyja and the other Ásynjur, is to take an isolated or obscure incident from a goddess's personal history and from that infer a dominant character trait: because they have 'slipped' at least once, he creates for them the identity of a figure that slips all the time. The act of creating a reputation for a woman is a means of redefining her character.⁵⁵³

This idea of the creation of a reputation supplanting or redefining a woman's actual character is best exemplified by the emphasis on Freyja's sexuality in *Prymskviða*, which is subject to several levels of interpretation. The first and most obvious of these levels is the humour generated by Þórr's request that Freyja marry Prymr in order to obtain his hammer, and her subsequent indignant refusal.⁵⁵⁴ The humour of this situation is dependent, in the first instance, on Þórr's assumptions regarding Freyja's character: his anticipation of her willingness to marry Prymr is predicated on an underlying belief in her

⁵⁵¹ Price (2002) 108-9 has argued that Fólkvangr may perhaps be seen as the 'alternative' final abode for worthy women, such as those who sacrificed themselves at funerals – an engaging idea, though one that is difficult to support on extant textual evidence.

⁵⁵² 'Lokasenna' 30-32.

⁵⁵³ McKinnell (2005) 91 has hinted at the possibility that her real-world acceptance into the cult of the Æsir could only be possible through her reconfiguration as a goddess of divine promiscuity – an interesting idea that, if true, might explain why the literary Æsir are so fixated on Freyja's sexual activity, despite the relative lack of texts that depict her being promiscuous.

⁵⁵⁴ 'Prymskviða' 12-3.

tendency to give herself over sexually to giants. That this situation is not explicitly spelled out also suggests an underlying assumption that the reader of the poem must have prior knowledge of Freyja's reputation for promiscuity, in order to get the joke. Loki anticipates Prymr's expectations concerning Freyja's rapacious sexual appetite, and constructs his illusion of the Freyja-Þórr image to take advantage of them (as was discussed in 1.4.2.). All told, every male figure in *Prymskviða*, plus perhaps any male audience member who is involving his own thoughts in his interpretation of the text, assumes Freyja's reputation for casual sexual liaisons to be justified; it is, therefore, of paramount importance that she emphatically does not consent to sexual union with Prymr.

Her refusal can be read in several different ways. On one level, it can be seen as comically hypocritical: after pledging her fulsome support to Þórr's cause in stanza 4, implicitly offering her aid in the form of great personal and financial expense to herself, her indignant refusal to be *merely* married off to Prymr is comical in light of her reputation for casual sex. Another interpretation which must, however, be considered, particularly considering the general lack of sexual activity that Freyja demonstrates in other texts, is that her comments are not intended to be taken ironically or as hypocrisy. She refuses Þórr's command, saying '*Mik veistu verða vergiarnasta, ef ek ek með þér í iǵtunheima*' 'You will see that I have become most man-mad if I drive with you to giant-land.'⁵⁵⁵ Freyja lays emphasis on the importance of a reputation and the extent to which it defines character, and implies that she is well aware of the reputation she possesses. The poem suggests that she is right to be concerned: her widely-credited reputation would be cemented by her willingness to undertake marriage to a giant. In *Prymskviða*, Freyja does not live up to her reputation: she is the only figure in the poem to resist her own Freyja-as-whore image, and yet by refusing to acquiesce she does succeed in disavowing it. Although

⁵⁵⁵ 'Prymskviða' 13.

there is comic potential in her fulsome offer of economic help preceding her outright refusal of sexual help, on a purely face-value level it implies that Freyja places a high premium on her chastity, valuing it over economic wealth.

Though Freyja's refusal to sleep with Pymr may run contrary to her reputation for promiscuity, in fact the care she evinces for her sexual bounty in *Prymskviða* agrees with the extant literary evidence: Freyja shows careful discernment in her choice of sexual partners, and she seems to have an antipathy towards giants. If Clunies Ross is correct in asserting that the Vanir's choice of sexual partners is socially limited to the giants, then by implication Freyja's sex life must not be as active as usually understood.⁵⁵⁶ Aside from *Prymskviða*, the subject of Freyja having a sexual liaison with a giant is broached only twice in the extant literature, and both instances occur in *Snorra Edda*. The first of these concerns the promise to give Freyja as part of the payment for the construction of Valhöll in the Master-Builder episode, and the second concerns the invasion of Valhöll by the giant Hrungr, who expresses sexual desire for both Freyja and Sif.⁵⁵⁷

In the first of these accounts, no mention is made of Freyja's agreement, or otherwise, to her role as bargaining chip; the fact that no reference at all is made to her having any input in the decision, the blame for which is attached to Loki, suggests that she has had little or no consultation, and that the arrangement for her to become the potential concubine of a giant has been organised entirely by the male figures to suit their own agenda. In the Hrungr episode, it is the giant who expresses his desire to take ownership of Freyja and Sif: Freyja's response is to give him alcohol, implicitly a delaying tactic to stall the giant's plans until such time as Þórr can appear to resolve the situation. There is, consequently, a consistent pattern across all three of these myths regarding Freyja's approach to sex with giants: in spite of her reputation for promiscuity, she has to be forced

⁵⁵⁶ Clunies Ross (1994a) 58.

⁵⁵⁷ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 34-6 and *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 20-24 respectively.

into these situations, and is usually observed working to extricate herself from them. She is at no point ever shown to have had sex with a giant. As a consequence, her refusal in *Prymskviða* is not as hypocritical as her reputation might suggest; it serves, in fact, to call the validity of her reputation into question.

Despite her physical appearance in *Prymskviða* being brief, Freyja, or more specifically her image, casts a long shadow over the events that follow, given that Þórr comes to inhabit her name, appearance, and function. If Loki's comments concerning Freyja in *Lokasenna* demonstrate how a reputation may be created by a few words, then his actions in *Prymskviða* show what can be achieved when he is given free rein to work at length. The method by which Loki creates the image of Freyja-Þórr has been discussed (in 1.4.2.), as has the impact on Þórr's character as a consequence of inhabiting that identity (in 1.2.4. and 1.3.3.), but now it is appropriate to assess the effect the creation of this identity has on the portrayal of the other figure who must inhabit it: Freyja.

Despite Þórr being the protagonist of *Prymskviða*, the fact that he is, however temporarily, wearing her face actually means that a large part of the poem is given over to considerations of Freyja and her attributes. Þórr's resolution to become Freyja, even if it is forced by circumstance and contrary to his will, shows that in some sense he actually places a lower premium on his social standing: whereas Freyja will not degrade herself, Þórr ultimately will. One facet of this situation is that whilst Freyja departs as a physical presence from the poem, by assuming her form Þórr in essence takes her reputation and character along with him into a potentially degrading situation. Loki may create the illusion of a goddess of inexhaustible sexual appetite as a means of pandering to Prymr's hopes and expectations, and in so doing he may protect both Þórr's mission and reputation, but it is important to consider that the illusion he spins is being imposed on Freyja's character. Despite her unwillingness to participate physically in this endeavour, she is in a

sense forced to participate by the unlicensed use of her name and image: I have argued previously (in 1.2.4.) that Loki's construction of a female identity provides a shield that protects Þórr's mission and, importantly, his reputation, but the shield is Freyja herself. Having to some extent distanced herself from her received reputation by her non-compliance, she is in fact slandered in her absence in what amounts to a form of character assassination.

Once again, Loki's underlying patriarchal mindset is evident: given free rein to create the identity of Freyja-Þórr, and safe in the knowledge that Freyja is not there to rebuke him, he creates a caricature that takes her function as a fertility goddess and recasts it as one of sexual excess that fits his, and the giant's, patriarchal expectations. If, as I have suggested, Freyja's reputation for sexual licentiousness is over-emphasised, and the extant literary material would in fact seem to support that conjecture, then Loki is doing in miniature what the Æsir as a whole perform on a grander level. Freyja's reputation for casual sex is simply not borne out by the literary evidence, but in the actions of Loki can be seen the degree to which a reputation is a social construct, and here it is a construct born out of patriarchal desire and will. The idea of Freyja-as-whore represents a misogynistic re-appropriation of her function as a fertility deity; it is clear that the Æsir believe it to be representative, and the suggestion of *Þrymskviða* seems to be that they all participate, consciously or otherwise, in the construction and perpetuation of that image. The idea of the wanton and sexually available goddess is as much a fantasy of the Æsir as it is of the giants, and can be used as a tool of necessity regardless of the woman's feelings.

2.4.4. Freyja as Aristocrat

Several sources, to be discussed shortly, connect Freyja with concepts of aristocracy. Freyja's aristocratic function is, in many ways, related to her sexual characteristics, as her aristocratic status is another element of her desirability. Some part of her aristocratic

function also seems to be bound up with her magical abilities: the pseudonym Gullveig, used of Freyja when she first introduces the force of magic into the world (as discussed in 2.4.2.) has, for example, been interpreted as meaning ‘Gold-draught.’⁵⁵⁸ Whilst the second element of the name suggests alcohol or intoxication, the other element concerns the idea of gold, which introduces the concept of economic forces. The *Völuspá* poet describes a world, before the introduction of women, in which gold is plentiful and uncontested.⁵⁵⁹ The association of the intoxication of gold with the Freyja-figure thus adds another potential layer of meaning to the war that is fought over her: not only is it emblematic of greed, making Gullveig’s economic worth as much of a factor as her sorcery, but it suggests the concept of warfare as a form of predatory economics.⁵⁶⁰ Like alcohol, aristocratic women are both consumable and tradable.⁵⁶¹ The three-way relationship between power, money and war can consequently be observed in the characterisation of Gullveig, and feed into the aristocratic concerns about her figure.

The concept of Freyja functioning as the prototype of aristocratic women is most strongly observed in *Ynglinga saga*:

Freyja held þá upp blótum, því at hon ein lifði þá eptir goðanna, ok varð hon þá in frægsta, svá at með hennar nafni skyldi kalla allar konur tígnar, svá sem nú heita frúvur. Svá hét ok hver freyja yfir sinni eigu, en sú húsfreyja, er bú á.

[Freyja kept up the sacrifices because she alone of the gods was living after that, and she became the best known, so that all noble women were to be called by her name, just as now they are called *frúvur* ‘ladies’. Likewise, everyone was also

⁵⁵⁸ Motz (1993b) 80-1 and Clunies Ross (1994a) 204. This is not uncontested: McKinnell (2005) 90 suggests it may mean ‘the lady made of/adorned with gold.’

⁵⁵⁹ ‘Völuspá’ 8.

⁵⁶⁰ McKinnell (2005) 90. Dronke (1988) 229 has argued that Gullveig may in fact represent a golden idol of Freyja, whose immolations and rebirths are in fact a process of melting down and reforming the idol.

⁵⁶¹ Clunies Ross (1994a) 205.

called *freyja* ‘mistress’ over her property, and she who lived in it was called *húsfreyja* ‘house-mistress’.]⁵⁶²

Snorri uses Freyja’s name as a sort of folk-etymology to explain why aristocratic women and the authoritative functions of women more generally are so called. In one sense this highlights the importance of Freyja to the construction of female identity as a whole in Norse society, but on another level it serves to depersonalise her: Freyja as aristocratic woman becomes all aristocratic women. After this etymology is given, a brief reference is made to Freyja’s family life, and after that Freyja disappears from Snorri’s narrative entirely. Despite being the last of the living gods and having had a major impact on the evolution of society through her religious functions, no mention is made of her death: for a historical chronicle that consists for the most part in a series of births and deaths of famous royal people, it is curious that a figure as important as Freyja does not have more attention. There is a sense that her physical presence is no longer of concern: her image has been incorporated into society as whole. The image of the empowered aristocratic woman is taken from her and diffused into a framework of social understanding, as defined by a patriarchal worldview: in much the same way as Loki takes the Freyja-as-whore image away from Freyja and subjects it to his own masculine interpretation, so too does the same process happen here with her aristocratic aspect. There is an essential sense of divorce between subject and image, and implicitly a priority is being placed on the image to the extent that the original woman simply fades into the narrative, no longer relevant and no longer interesting: the way in which she is defined, and how that definition can be expanded to encapsulate other women, seems to be what is important.

That a comparison can be drawn between the ways in which the images of Freyja as whore and aristocrat are used by male figures raises the question of whether the application of the latter image to Freyja is as justified as the application of the former, the

⁵⁶² *Ynglinga saga* (1979) 24-5.

validity of which was discussed above. In many respects Freyja does conform to the aristocratic label: her association with gold, and particularly her apparent ability to produce it from her body by producing liquid gold when she weeps, signify her as a profound economic force, with the maintenance and movement of wealth being a major aristocratic concern.⁵⁶³ She is also mistress of her own property, Fólkvangr, where according to *Grímnismál* she receives dead humans into her society.⁵⁶⁴ Stewardship of the dead is a privilege she shares with only Óðinn and Hel, and whilst Hel must make do with the outcasts, *Grímnismál* tells us that Óðinn and Freyja share the worthy dead in equal measure.⁵⁶⁵ This is an important factor: Freyja is a property owner, like Frigg, but unlike her she is also able to assemble a court of human vassals around her.⁵⁶⁶ It is an arrangement that she shares only with Óðinn, the preeminent god of the aristocracy, and thus it serves to set her on a similar social level. Despite her origin as one of the second-class Vanir, Freyja is exalted to a position of high aristocratic status by dint of her economic wealth, her capacity to claim sovereignty over warriors, and the role of psychopomp that she shares with Óðinn in the claiming of the glorious dead.⁵⁶⁷

Despite Freyja possessing, and functioning through, the trappings of aristocratic life, however, there are elements to her portrayal in the literature that problematise this image of her. In an earlier discussion (see 2.2.2.), it was argued that the manner in which Frigg is portrayed deliberately examines the tension between accepted and deviant queenly behaviour, and ultimately suggested that she treads a fine line between assisting and resisting her husband: their marriage is not idealised by any measure, but it is at least a workable one. The domestic situation of Freyja's aristocratic setting seems to be more

⁵⁶³ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 29.

⁵⁶⁴ 'Grímnismál' 14.

⁵⁶⁵ Some scholars have argued that Freyja and Hel may in fact be the same figure, but this seems unlikely; see Schjødtt (2008) 390 for more information.

⁵⁶⁶ There is also some suggestion that she may have primacy over her own band of valkyries; see Schjødtt (2008) 386.

⁵⁶⁷ Indeed, as Quinn (2006) 54 notes, allowing for the dead who go to Freyja and Hel, Óðinn must in fact get a statistically small number of the sum total of the dead, even if they are intended to be the best of them.

troubled than that of Frigg's, for there is an anxiety generated by the permanent absence of her husband, Óðr. Like Frigg, Freyja is an aristocratic woman whose role encompasses weeping, the importance of which was discussed previously. There is, however, an important difference in that Frigg's weeping spells take place within very specific timeframes and are related to specific events, namely in response to her son's killing and finally for her husband's death at *ragnarök*. Freyja's weeping, by contrast, is given no temporal boundary in the extant literature: what is a temporary state for Frigg is a permanent state for Freyja. This sense of grief is important: whilst Óðinn and Frigg are shown as capable of loving each other and existing together to some degree, Freyja's domestic life seems permanently and distressingly broken. The idea of her absent husband may also factor into the gods' skewed perception of Freyja's sexual availability: she is an aristocratic woman denied access to her husband's body.

As has been argued, an important part of the function of the female aristocrat is the production and preservation of heirs as a means of supporting dynastic continuation: in the case of Frigg, heavy emphasis is laid on her interactions with Baldr. Freyja is ascribed two daughters, Hnoss and Gersemi, but they are ill described, and seem to function as nothing more than extensions of their mother's attributes.⁵⁶⁸ They only appear, furthermore, in texts by Snorri. Whether or not these two daughters are an invention of Snorri, they are certainly obscure figures; for a goddess of fertility with an alleged reputation for sexual licence, Freyja's apparent lack of fecundity is noteworthy. Her failure to produce sons, and having only two daughters who seem to possess no aspect of their father whatsoever, links Freyja into the concept of dynastic failure, partly as an echo of the Baldr situation but also as reworking of the marital situation of her brother, Freyr. His ill choice of Gerðr as a bride (as discussed in 2.3.2.) creates a situation whereby their union does not produce fruit, and Gerðr herself is largely absent; Freyr's marriage represents a dynastic endpoint, a branch of

⁵⁶⁸ Clunies Ross (1994a) 205.

the family tree of the Vanir which has become unproductive. A similar scenario was observed with Njörðr and Skaði (in 2.3.3.). With Freyja, the literature is perhaps providing us with the same situation from the opposite viewpoint: she, like Gerðr and Skaði, has had a difficult initiation into the society of the Æsir, and is in some sense physically removed from her husband, but in Freyja's case the narrative focus is clearly on her, on the female character. It was argued above (see 2.3.2.) that Gerðr's physical and emotional distance from her husband was a form of victory over his attempt to oppress her; in this instance, however, it is Freyja's aristocratic credibility which is being undermined by her absent husband, to her obvious distress. In a sense, Freyja fits no more easily into the model of divine wife than the other outsider women, Gerðr and Skaði. It seems that for a woman to function effectively under the label of divine wife, her husband must be in proximity to maintain that definition.

In conclusion it may be said that Freyja seems to be a figure who resists a set of labels that patriarchal society, whether that of the Æsir or the giants, seems determined to place upon her. It is an attempt to reduce her to a single and easily utilisable function, such as that presented by Iðunn, but one that is ultimately unsatisfying. Her sorcery represents an exploitable form of power for the men of divine society to pursue actively, but she herself seems coolly indifferent to it. There also seems to be an attempt to categorise her femininity into two contrasting roles: as whore she is created into the role of a sexual fantasy, a figure of overwhelming sexual appetite who serves to satisfy male desires, whilst at the other extreme of the scale she is cast as an idealised female figure in role of the perfect female aristocrat. Neither of these images, on inspection, can be seen to be totally convincing: Freyja is too complex a character to be neatly parcelled into preset patriarchal expectations, and the fact that male society continually attempt to do so reflects more on them than it does on her.

2.5 Conclusions

This section of thesis has concerned itself with examining some of the most prominent goddesses of the Norse mythological universe. In particular, the way male figures interact with these women was examined, as well as the ways in which both males and females participate in the creation of different female identities and images. It can be seen that male figures often seem to approach their female opposites with either a preconceived notion of the manner and method by which these figures act, or else exhibit a desire to impose a strict and confining label upon them. The intent of these limited definitions of female roles can usually be seen to support a patriarchal social order. It is clear that male figures have a deeply ingrained conception of the types of female figure; it is also clear that a great many of these female characters do not conform to, or actively resist, the image that patriarchal society attempts to lay over their personality. It is also evident that these female figures demonstrate a canniness in the way they interact with these images: they are able to work behind or through them to their own advantage, and are capable of making alterations to their images to suit their own agenda.

The desire to reduce empowered women to emblems of their function, consciously or unconsciously, is a recurring theme of heterosocial relations, and is demonstrated most clearly in the literary representation of Iðunn, the most passive figure discussed in this section. Her relative anonymity is underscored by the vital function she provides to divine society: it was shown that male characters focus so entirely on her function that her personality and personal free will are sidelined, and that the process of emblemisation leads to a trivialisation of the figure by her male compatriots. The extent of Iðunn's importance to the continued success of divine society becomes obvious to an outsider such as Gangleri, whose earnest interest in her underscores the flippancy of Hár's treatment of her.

The other member of the ‘domestic’ Ásynjur analysed here is Frigg, a figure who can be seen to be more active than Iðunn in operating under and around the labels placed upon her by her husband’s social circle. Despite the brevity of her appearances in the literature, it can be seen that she displays an independence of thought and action that allow her to surpass the image of the prototypical queen figure that divine society assigns to her, although she is also capable of fully utilising her royal role when she wishes to do so. It seems clear that Frigg has her own agenda which she pursues from the sidelines of many of the mythological poems; it is also hinted in such texts that Óðinn has a naively skewed view of the dynamics of power and authority within his own marriage. That Frigg possesses great, if understated, power and authority is made evident by the literature on a number of occasions, but it is also made clear that her power is exercised only on her terms and at her discretion, a requirement that forces her husband to look elsewhere for magical aid; the implication seems to be that he is unwilling to accept Frigg’s power when it is subject to her own control. The overall picture is of a woman of ability and power who succeeds in safeguarding the independence of her authority, but in so doing serves to detach herself from her family: the literature presents, through the use of her physical sense of separation, a woman whose independence comes at the cost of her ability to provide much real benefit to divine society. That she is in some sense able to resist the labels that society places upon her confirms her separateness from that society.

The act of males creating a specific role for women within their society is particularly evident when considering the women who are adopted into the family of the gods, as they often have a prior existence that is markedly different from the position they are supposed to take up. The most common method of adopting women into divine society is through marital alliance, and the two most prominent examples of this are Gerðr and Skaði: both integrations are problematic, regardless of whether it is the male or female party that forces the contract. In both situations it can be seen that these female figures

strongly resist or pervert the identities that patriarchal society attempts to create for them. In an ironic way, the images which male figures fashion for these women in order to control them or make them more socially acceptable, can in fact be turned around to inflict harm upon those men. It is possible to read *Skírnismál* as a warning against trying to force women into preconceived roles, and about the far-reaching consequences this can generate: the identity that is created for Gerðr can be seen to have troubling implications with regard to Freyr's position, and that of the gods as a whole. In the case of Skaði, the act of putting her into a preconceived role in divine society is very openly an attempt to disempower her, to remove her individual and highly masculine agency by requiring her to conform to normative female sexual roles. The marital difficulties that plague Njörðr and Skaði suggest that it has not been an unqualified success: once again, the redefinition of Skaði's character has had unforeseen consequences for the Vanir. Overall, the negative associations of both of these marriages, Gerðr's and Skaði's, are threaded through a large number of sources with what appears to be remarkable consistency, suggesting this idea of the redefined woman as a dangerous social agent is deeply entrenched.

The final figure under consideration is Freyja, who is adopted into divine society with her fellow Vanir. It was suggested that there were three archetypal roles which male characters traditionally anticipate her to fall into: the witch, the whore, and the aristocrat. It can be seen that Freyja's actions frequently do not fit comfortably into these roles, and that in fact these preconceived labels seem to be more of a strategy by male characters to understand or control a figure who is both powerful and enigmatic. Freyja, like Frigg, is capable of both resisting an image that males try to place on her, or else utilising it to her advantage and for her own private agenda.

In conclusion, this whole section serves to demonstrate that there is a consistent strategy on the part of male figures to apply labels to female characters, often as a means of understanding, acquiring or containing their power. It is a measure of how unsuccessful

they are that even the women who are notionally on their side so actively resist this process, or use it to their own advantages. The overall view seems to be one in which the men are not nearly as in control of events and people as they believe themselves to be, and that the women, far from being easily compartmentalised adjuncts to patriarchal hegemony, are aggressively engaged in defining their own roles in such a way as to destabilise the illusion of male control.

Section 3: Male Interactions with Feminised Concepts of Fate and Death

3.1. Introduction

This final section will examine supernatural women who interact in some way with the social circle of the Æsir, but are not part of the Ásynjur. Some of these will be highly individual and developed characters, such as Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr or the giantess Hyndla, whereas other will be representatives of a larger and more nebulous class of being that appear in numerous texts, such as the norns or valkyries. These figures, furthermore, are found not only in the immediate society of the Æsir, but are also active in the human world: they straddle the boundary between divine and human society.

The subject of the relationship between males and various classes of supernatural females is a vast one, and consequently it is only practical to take a limited approach here. This section will therefore focus on the concepts of fate and death, two of the most prominent and prevailing concerns for males in mythological narratives. These two concepts are further notable in that they are strongly associated with both abstract femininity and specific female figures.⁵⁶⁹ Given the patriarchal concerns of much Old Norse literature, the gendering of fate and death places a new colouring on the ways in which male gods and heroes react against those concepts. The tension between male figures and inexorable fate becomes, inevitably, a form of gender conflict, and the manner in which male figures characterise and react to these female figures who are imbued with both power and significance can convey a great deal of information about both parties.

The initial examination will be of the categories of female characters closely associated with the direct management of fate and death, i.e. the norns and the valkyries, and how they function in both the human and divine worlds. With regard to valkyries, the discussion will include a discourse on the function of the transformed princess, who can be both valkyrie and troll-woman. This will lead into a broader discussion of the figure of the

⁵⁶⁹ Quinn (2006) discusses the gendering of fate and death in detail.

völva. This analysis will building on material from earlier in this study (notably in 1.3.3.) that examined how specific male characters interact with this figure; the upcoming discussion will focus on the depiction of the *völur* as independent figures in their own right, particularly with regard to how they mediate between male characters and concepts of destiny. The final section will analyse the complex, mysterious and border-straddling figure of Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr, whose associations with fate and death can be seen to have a highly political role in human society.

3.2. Norns and Valkyries

3.2.1. Introduction

Given the patriarchal nature of many the societies depicted in Old Norse literature, it is curious that the elaborate community of beings that oversee the administration of fate, a concept of tremendous importance in the literary imagination, is populated almost exclusively by female figures. Óðinn appears to be the only male figure who actively interferes in the workings of destiny and death, a field of influence in which Freyja, Hel, the valkyries and the norns all have important roles.⁵⁷⁰ A great deal of the actual business of destiny, consequently, is not in the hands of the male Æsir, and is portrayed entirely within the ambit of female control. Indeed, the inevitability of *ragnarök*, despite Óðinn's many documented attempts to find some way of escaping his own mortality, effectively suggests that the gods are also subject to the external force of fate. This section will focus on the women most associated with fate and death: the norns and the valkyries.

One major issue when dealing with these groupings of supernatural women, such as the norns or valkyries, is the justification for their delineation into separate groups. Whilst most literature seems to make some distinction between the exact functions of norns and valkyries, there is nevertheless a considerable overlap between them.⁵⁷¹ A term that is commonly used, both in the literature itself and by scholars of the material, is the nebulous term *dísir*, which signifies a broad category of supernatural women that often includes the norns and the valkyries within its designation. There is a long-standing debate regarding the extent to which the *dísir* can be seen as an independent category, and to what extent the norns and valkyries can legitimately be perceived as part of that group; the overall picture is a confused one, there it being unclear what distinction, if any, a medieval audience

⁵⁷⁰ Quinn (2006) 54-5.

⁵⁷¹ Bek-Pedersen (2011) 14-5.

would make between these terms.⁵⁷² Whilst the tradition that produced these literary figures is likely to be ancient it is possible that the category distinctions of these goddesses have been further confused by the attempts of later writers to force them into a patriarchal social system.⁵⁷³ In order to avoid perpetuating this confusion, this thesis will generally avoid the term *dísir*, and will focus exclusively on those figures overtly termed either norns or valkyries. Whilst there will be some discussion of the overlap between these two terms, it will only be to assess the situations in which the same figure is treated as both norn and valkyrie.

3.2.2. Norns

The norns are an ambiguous class of supernatural beings and yet they clearly hold an important place in the ordering of the Old Norse cosmos; though no single story focuses specifically on their workings, they are nevertheless ‘well documented both in the Eddic lays... and in other heroic poetry, as well as in skaldic poetry from the 10th century onwards and in prose texts.’⁵⁷⁴ Generally speaking, representations of the norns can be broken down into two distinct types: the first are generic norns, a limitless and largely uncharacterised collective of personal spirits whose usual function is to oversee and plan out the destinies of various individuals; the second grouping of norns is the three maidens, Urðr, Skuld and Verðandi, who are given a much stronger sense of individuality than the generic norns, and who are seemingly responsible for the administration of all fate in *Völuspá* and in Snorri’s interpretation of the poem.⁵⁷⁵ It seems likely that the three maidens may be a later evolution of the original, and ancient, idea of the many norns.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷² See Bek-Pedersen (2011) 41-8 for a discussion of this, as well as for an overview of scholarly research into the *dísir*.

⁵⁷³ Mundal (1990) 303.

⁵⁷⁴ Simek (1993) 237.

⁵⁷⁵ Tally Lionarons (2005) 282.

⁵⁷⁶ Winterbourne (2004) 86 and Bek-Pedersen (2011) 88.

Although this present study is interested only in their role in literature, it is worth noting that Bek-Pedersen has suggested, based on the evidence of skaldic poetry, that the norns may have occupied a position of importance in real-world human society as figures of worship, or at the very least were considered of immediate significance to pre-Christian everyday life.⁵⁷⁷ This is in some sense confirmed by the fullest treatment of the norns, which is found in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* and covers both types of norn described above:

Þar stendr salr einn fagr undir askinum við brunninn, ok ór þeim sal koma þrjár meyjar þær er svá heita: Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld. Þessar meyjar skapa mönnum aldr. Þær kóllum vér nornir. Enn eru fleiri nornir, þær er koma til hvers manns er borinn er at skapa aldr, ok eru þessar goðkunnigar, en aðrar álfa ættar, en inar þriðju dverga ættar.

[...]

Þá mælir Gangleri: 'Ef nornir ráða orlogum manna, þá skipta þær geysi ójafnt, er sumir hafa gott líf ok ríkuligt, en sumir hafa lítit lén eða lof, sumir langt líf, sumir skammt.'

Hár segir: 'Góðar nornir ok vel ættaðar skapa góðan aldr, en þeir menn er fyrir ósköpum verða, þá valda því illar nornir.'

[...]

Enn er þat sagt, at nornir þær er byggja við Urðar brunn taka hvern dag vatn í brunninum ok með aurinn þann er liggr um brunninn, ok ausa upp yfir askinn til þess at eigi skyli limar hans tréna eða fúna. En þat vatn er svá heilagt at allir hlutir þeir sem þar koma í brunninn verða svá hvítir sem hinna sú er skjall heitir, er innan liggr við eggskurn.

[In that place stands a certain fair hall under the ash by the well, and out of that hall come three maidens, who are thus named: Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld. These maidens

⁵⁷⁷ Bek-Pedersen (2011) 20-1.

shape the life of people. They are called *norns*. There are yet more *norns*, who come to each person who is born to shape their life, and they are akin to the gods, but others are of the kindred of elves, and a third group are of the kindred of dwarves. [...] Then Gangleri said: ‘If *norns* decide the fates of men, they share things out very unevenly, since some have a good and magnificent life, but some have little good fortune or praise, some long life, some short.’ Hár said: ‘Good *norns*, who are also of good lineage, shape a good life, but for the men who meet with misfortune, evil *norns* are the cause of it.’ [...] It is also said that those *norns* which live by *Urðr*’s well take, each day, water from the well, and with it the mud that lies around the well, and pour it over the ash so that its branches should not dry up or decay. And this water is so holy that all things that come into the well become as white as the membrane, which is called *skjall*, that lies inside an eggshell.]⁵⁷⁸

This is a long and fragmentary section, interspersed with eddic stanzas not quoted here, but it contains a great deal of information. It is, importantly, the figure of Hár who delivers this information, and consequently we must take into account how his perception might be understood to colour this description. His conception of the *norns* reveals several important facts about their state of being. First, being a *norn* is more of a job than a species designation, their numbers being drawn from the various major groups of mythological beings except, possibly, the *Æsir* and *Vanir*, who are not directly named. Whether they are included or not is very ambiguous; it is certainly true to say that none of the named *Æsir* and *Vanir* are ever observed acting as *norns* in any of the extant texts, although Freyja and Skaði seem to have some ill-defined and not well documented relationship with the *dísir*.⁵⁷⁹ Second, the *norns* have some concept of social hierarchy and obligation: they can come from good or bad family stock, and this has some bearing on the execution of their

⁵⁷⁸ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 18-19.

⁵⁷⁹ Bek-Pedersen (2011) 46.

role; that the norns are capable of benevolence and malevolence suggests they have an understanding of the moral aspect of their actions.

The geographical location of the three female norns described by Hár is important and in some sense echoes the anxieties concerning female territories that were evident with the figures of Frigg and Skaði discussed previously (in 2.2.2. and 2.3.3.). The three norns possess their own hall, an indication that they are civilised beings acclimatised to human-like dwellings and also that they are independent property owners. The location of this hall next to Urðr's well is important for two reasons: first, by having access to the rejuvenating qualities of the well and to the body of Yggdrasill itself, the norns function as the literal sustainers of the world. Their primacy of control over the destinies of all men is emphasised by the fact that the continued existence, or not, of all the worlds is linked to their function.⁵⁸⁰ Hár is, consequently, displaying some of his characteristic dismissiveness concerning the extent of female power, much as he did with his description of Iðunn's kidnapping (discussed in 2.2.3): the power of the norns must, perforce, not only cover humanity but extend to all things that live in all worlds, including the gods themselves.⁵⁸¹ The second important factor about the location of the norns' hall that it is a remote place geographically separated from the other realms located the world-tree. The remoteness of their hall importantly places the norns at a significant distance from the home territory of the Æsir, symbolically locating their power beyond the reach of divine society. This is a situation similar to the way in which the literature separates Frigg's powers from Óðinn's agency by the fact of Fensalir's separateness: The working of fate is characterised as a female power, and that power is not contained within or constrained by the courts of the Æsir.

⁵⁸⁰ This idea is the central thesis of Bauschatz (1982), which comprises an extensive discussion about the relationship between the norns and Yggdrasill.

⁵⁸¹ Tally Lionarons (2005) 283.

In describing Urðr's well, Hár draws attention to its separation from Ásgarðr: *Par eigu guðin dómstað sinn. Hvern dag ríða Æsir þangat upp um Bifröst* 'There the gods have their court; they ride there every day up over Bifröst'.⁵⁸² Further mention is made of the horses that the Æsir must employ to achieve this journey, and Þórr is singled out as having the particularly onerous task of walking there, a process which involves having to wade through four rivers.⁵⁸³ Whether the Ásynjur are thought to be part of this group who travel to Urðr's well is unclear, but it is important that all the gods who are named directly are male: Hár is implicitly giving the group a phallocentric focus, a focus emphasised by the journey of these males into a specifically female-oriented territory. It is also clear from Hár's information that the daily commute to Urðr's well is a significant undertaking.

Neither Hár nor the eddic stanza that he cites provides any information for why the Æsir make this difficult journey except to hold their court and, in the case of Þórr at least, but presumably in that of all the gods, to make judgements. Exactly what this entails is unclear, nor is the necessity of the location explained. As mentioned previously, the many beings who make up the large tribe of the norns as a whole are drawn from most, if not all, major mythological species, possibly but not definitely including the Æsir and Vanir, but it is noticeable that whilst the gods congregate at Urðr's well, no mention is made of them actually interacting with the norns while they are there.

Whilst one must be circumspect about making arguments based on an absence of evidence, the fact that both the gods and the norns feature widely in this literature but do not seem to interact with each other (except for one notable exception which will be discussed below in 3.2.3.⁵⁸⁴) is very interesting, in that the norns are referenced in a huge amount of literature in which they are observed interacting with humans and, in a very few

⁵⁸² *Gylfaginning* (2005) 17.

⁵⁸³ *Gylfaginning* 17-8.

⁵⁸⁴ See *Gylfaginning* (2005) 30. This concerns Skuld who, however, is functioning as a valkyrie rather than a norn in this passage.

cases, beings of dwarfish extraction, but (beyond the exception just mentioned) there is no extant literature whatsoever that directly shows the gods interacting with the norns, as noted by Bek-Pedersen.⁵⁸⁵ At the same time, it is clear that the gods, in many of their mythological undertakings recounted across the corpus of literary sources, would greatly benefit from consultation with a norn. This is particularly true of Óðinn, given his long-standing obsession with his fate: over the course of his adventures, he seeks wisdom from his wife, Freyja, giants, valkyries, kings, troll-women and *völur*, so it is probably significant that neither he, nor any other Áss, is ever mentioned as consulting with a norn, despite the daily visit to Urðr's well. This situation may therefore imply a coolness in relations between the Æsir and the norns, or at least some kind of aloofness between them, if not even outright antagonism. In any case, it can be said that the literature's silence on the interaction between the two tribes raises some interesting possibilities for reading the relationship between them.

The gods conduct their business in a place that is inhabited by a social group that is, in fact, more powerful than they are, and Hár's silence on any details of their interactions prompts the reader to wonder whether he is being chary about the relationship between the Æsir and the norns (one must remember that Snorri is engaged in characterising Hár as well as conveying information). If he is, the reason is likely to concern the power relations between them, since he is interested in emphasising the mastery of the gods. One possible reading of the situation is that the patriarchal Æsir are acting in imitation of the female norns, the male gods copying the female collective, and they are thus attempting in some sense to take on both their function and location: the Æsir are literally and metaphorically taking the place of the norns.⁵⁸⁶ Another possible reading of the situation, however, is that

⁵⁸⁵ Bek-Pedersen (2007) 7.

⁵⁸⁶ A further aspect of comparison in which one group imitates the other is suggested by Clunies Ross (1994a) 170, who argues that the action of the three norns who give mankind fate in *Völuspá* 20 is a direct response to the gods' creation of human life.

the gods are engaging in something like a pilgrimage to a holy place, in acknowledgement that they are beings subject to fate, and that in that place the norms can impart some fateful power to the gods which relates to their acts of judgement. These two readings are not completely incompatible, of course, because the gods are complex and inconsistent personalities, but on an analytical level the scenarios are in some sense mutually contradictory.

Of the two readings, the former seems more probable because in a wide range of other texts the gods have a conflicted attitude towards the powers of fate: like humans they are not only subject to fate but are compelled to fight against it. In fact the gods are in a permanent state of fighting against, or seeking to circumvent, fate.⁵⁸⁷ From a literary standpoint, this may mostly be a product of the need to create narrative tension in many mythological episodes, a tension that would be undercut if the divine protagonists had cordial relations with beings possessing a perfect understanding of fate. Throughout the literature that depicts the norms interacting with humans, there is a frequent underlying sense that the norms are sinister, that they are ‘most often associated with bad fortune and specifically with death.’⁵⁸⁸ The negative associations of the norms contribute to the sense of opposition between mankind and fate, and specifically draw it into a sense of gender conflict: the male characters in narratives that describe men fighting against fate (which will be discussed at length in 3.4.3.) rail against unfair destinies imposed upon them by powerful but distant female figures. The same is implicitly true of the situation of the gods: Óðinn is also fighting against destiny, the unremitting harshness and intractability of which is characterised in female form. His ultimately doomed struggle against fate is only meaningful, from a narrative standpoint, if he is denied access to the figures who shape it:

⁵⁸⁷ This can be seen particularly in relation to Óðinn, the leader of the gods, as discussed above in 1.3.2.; furthermore, one can see the Æsir acting collectively in this respect in *Lokasenna*, in which the desire to postpone *ragnarök* by delaying the final breach with Loki is the implicit motivation for their actions.

⁵⁸⁸ Tally Lionarons (2005) 284. See also Bek-Pedersen (2011) 40-5 for a survey of these negative associations of the norms.

because he fights against fate, he implicitly fights against the *norns*, a subtlety that would be destroyed were a text actually to bring him face-to-face with them. Even though no overt conflict between them is depicted in the literature, it can be said that the *norns*, instead of being direct combatants, are seen as the shadowy and – importantly – female power against which Óðinn and his patriarchal society are defined. In this context, the actions of that god and his circle are directed not towards the *norns* themselves, as the shapers of fate, but towards the enemies whom fate sets against them.

In view of the above, therefore, the *norns* and the gods can reasonably be seen as antagonists, if for no other reason than that the gods are antagonistic towards the *norns* as agents of fate. The relationship between them is more complex than simply this, as discussed above, but the element of antagonism should not be ignored.

3.2.3. Valkyries

The valkyries are a body of empowered females associated specifically with death in battle; the term ‘valkyrie’ means ‘chooser of the slain’.⁵⁸⁹ In a sense, they have a similar function to that of the *norns*, but one expressed on a much smaller scale: they oversee fate in only one specific scenario, and not over the world as a whole, possibly representing the ‘heroiskt-mytiska aspekten’ of the *norns*’ larger, more fatalistic function.⁵⁹⁰ Unlike the *norns*, however, the valkyries have been the subject of a great deal of scholarly debate, probably as a result of their more developed appearances in Old Norse literature.⁵⁹¹

As with the *norns*, there is a sense that the valkyries can be divided into two distinct but sometimes overlapping types: the terrifying demons of death and carnage who dictate the course of battles and claim the souls of the fallen, and the more humane (and

⁵⁸⁹ Simek (1993) 349.

⁵⁹⁰ Ström (1954) 86.

⁵⁹¹ Major studies include Ström (1954), Ellis (1969) 65-82, Jochens (1994) 38-40, Ellis Davidson (1998) 174-81, DuBois (1999), Tally Lionarons (2005) 288-93, Quinn (2006), and Bek-Pedersen (2011) 49-56.

sometimes actually human) warrior-maidens and career princesses who involve themselves in the domestic lives of various heroes.⁵⁹² The general scholarly consensus is that the first of these represents the earliest, prototypical kind of valkyrie, whilst the image of the valkyrie-shieldmaiden is a later evolution of that figure.⁵⁹³ There is also a distinction to be made between the social circles in which these two forms of valkyrie move: the prototypical valkyries inhabit the halls of the gods, acting as functionaries of the gods and the enforcers of their will, whilst the valkyrie-shieldmaidens are predominantly active in the human world.⁵⁹⁴ The shieldmaiden type of valkyrie will be assessed later on (in 3.3.2); this section will deal predominantly with the valkyries who dwell in and around the halls of the gods.

As with the norns, it is Snorri, through the figure of Hár, who provides the clearest definition of the valkyries, apparently synthesising his view from a number of eddic and skaldic stanzas quoted throughout the body of his *Edda*:

Enn eru þær aðrar er þjóna skulu í Valhöll, bera drykkju ok gæta borðbúnaðar ok ǫlgagna... Þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hverrar orrustu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri. Guðr ok Rota ok norn in yngsta er Skuld heitir ríða jafnan at kjósa val ok ráða vígum.

[Also there are others who must work in Valhöll, serve drink and look after the table-ware and drinking vessels... These are called valkyries. Óðinn sends them to every battle. They decide death for men and govern victory. Guðr and Rota and the youngest norn, who is called Skuld, always ride to decide who shall be slain and to govern killings.]⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹² Foote and Wilson (1970) 391-2.

⁵⁹³ Simek (1993) 349.

⁵⁹⁴ Jochens (1996) 39.

⁵⁹⁵ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 30.

Once again, Hár's pronouncement on the function of a group of female beings contains a huge amount of information in a relatively short statement. Unlike the *norns* in their distant and difficult to access hall, the *valkyries* are active at the *Æsir*'s central powerbase, Óðinn's hall of Valhöll: they are part of the domestic scene, an internal rather than an external force.⁵⁹⁶

This difference of habitation also entails a sense of diminished social status: though Valhöll is a magnificent hall, it is not the independent property of the *valkyries* in the way that the *norns*' hall seems unarguably their own: it is Óðinn's personal, male-orientated territory.⁵⁹⁷ The reduction in social status, from a propertied to a non-propertied class, is emphasised through the *valkyries*' actions of domestic servitude; like the *norns*, the *valkyries* function as sustainers and orderers, but whilst the *norns* sustain the entire cosmos at their own discretion through their ministrations of Yggdrasill, the *valkyries* supply the tables of Valhöll, and by extension the guests who use them. There is a sense that the *valkyries*, in performing a standard female role within the context of a patriarchal and human-like social space, that of drink-bearing, have lost some of the independence that characterises the *norns*.⁵⁹⁸ They have been 'domesticated... by an assumed analogy to the activities of human women within the patriarchal society of the Viking Age.'⁵⁹⁹ This idea of the *valkyries* as celestial barmaids clearly predates Snorri, as it is widely referenced in skaldic poetry.⁶⁰⁰

This concept of the *valkyries* being in some sense limited when compared with the *norns* is also suggested by contrasting their mutual roles in the administration of death and fate. The *norns* are implied to have a near-omnipotent degree of power over the fates of all

⁵⁹⁶ Hár noticeably does not reference the fact that there is a connection between *valkyries* and Freyja's hall of Fölkvangr as well: his focus is clearly on the idea of *valkyries* inhabiting male territory. See Schjødt (2008) 386 for more on Freyja's relationship with the *valkyries*.

⁵⁹⁷ Ármann Jakobsson (2011) 8-9 offers a reversed view of this situation: the presence of the *valkyries* in Óðinn's hall serves to feminise the god's territory and frames of reference.

⁵⁹⁸ Jochens (1995) 107.

⁵⁹⁹ Tally Lionarons (2005) 275.

⁶⁰⁰ Bek-Pedersen (2011) 51.

things, as evidenced by their maintenance of the world-tree and their establishing of fate for gods and men in *Völuspá*, whilst the valkyries express their power only in the context of the battlefield. This is emphasised by Hár's careful phrasing: whilst it is clear that on the battlefield the valkyries manifest an absolute power over who lives and dies, Hár notes that they are sent there at Óðinn's instigation. The language used makes it ambiguous as to whether the valkyries on the battlefield are picking the slain at their own discretion, or at the behest of Óðinn's agenda, though Hár, having provided an initial image of the valkyries as serving-women, seems to want his interlocutor to assume the latter: it is certainly clear that Hár is describing a scenario in which Óðinn is at the very least in charge of the valkyries, and that there is the implicit possibility that he is actively engaged in the micromanagement of their activities. This is a small but important point: either the valkyries work exclusively as extensions of Óðinn's will, or else they have an independent right of judging who shall die in battle, which they are only able to access if Óðinn enables them to do so. In either case, they work in reaction to male prerogative, and thus do not seem to display the independence of action that characterises the norns in Snorri's text.

The issue of the relative powers of the norns and the valkyries is complicated by the presence of Skuld, the norn who functions as a valkyrie under Óðinn's command. Skuld's role as one of Óðinn's valkyries is referenced in *Völuspá*, so this situation cannot be easily dismissed as Snorri's invention.⁶⁰¹ Exactly how or why this arrangement exists is never made clear, but given the subtle but suggestive undercurrents that characterised the relationship between the Æsir and the norns as whole social tribes, outlined above, Skuld's presence amongst Óðinn's retinue is quite telling. Unlike Urðr and Verðandi, who remain distant from the Æsir in all extant sources, Skuld interacts with them in their own territory. It is interesting that Hár specifically draws attention to Skuld's status as a norn, and that she is the youngest of them. In so doing, he emphasises the existence of the other norns

⁶⁰¹ 'Völuspá' 30.

and draws attention to their absence amongst Óðinn's functionaries. The designation of Skuld as the youngest norn, a description that does not occur elsewhere, is an unusual detail, but one that I think accords with Skuld's role as the only norn who also works as a valkyrie.⁶⁰² Given that many of Óðinn's actions demonstrate him attempting to acquire power that is not naturally his, and suggest his imperfect control over that power (see 1.3.3.), one can read his relationship with Skuld, and Skuld alone, in a similar light. Óðinn is a being subject to fate who nevertheless seeks mastery over it, and to some limited extent acquires it. This is symbolised by his employment of the youngest, and thus in some sense the lowest status, norn as a valkyrie. The valkyries function as a limited form of norn, reflecting the partial control Óðinn possesses over fate; he has some jurisdiction over the least of the three main norns, but he cannot use her potential except within a restricted scenario, that of the battlefield.

This concept of the valkyries as norns who have been in some sense subordinated, as reflected in Skuld's unique position with Óðinn's household, is compounded by the way in which the Æsir respond to the norns as a whole class. *Völuspá* paints a world in which the appearance of the norns fundamentally changes the society of the Æsir:

Tefldo í túni, teitir vóro,
var þeim vettergis vant ór gulli,
unz þriár kvómo, þursa meyar,
ámátkar miðk, ór iqtunheimom.

⁶⁰² One possible explanation for Hár's designation of Skuld as the youngest norn is of course that it may be a kind of joke, or perhaps a play on words, regarding her name, one potential meaning of which is 'future'. If Skuld can be seen as the norn responsible for the future, then there is a certain logic in her being the youngest; another possible meaning of her name is discussed below, with different connotations. Whatever Hár's motives might be for drawing attention to Skuld's relative youthfulness, it still serves to give her a subordinate status.

[They played *tefl* in the enclosure, were cheerful, there was no lack of gold for them, until three figures came, maidens of the giants, overwhelmingly powerful from giant-lands.]⁶⁰³

The three giantesses in this stanza are generally accepted to be Urðr, Skuld and Verðandi.⁶⁰⁴ The norns are thus in some sense similar to the figure of Gullveig, whose appearance sparks the first war in the world (see 2.4.2.): prior to the arrival of these empowered female figures, the gods inhabit an idyllic world. Clunies Ross has described the giantesses as a ‘disturbing and disorganised principle’, and these three norns of giant stock embody that concept most forcefully.⁶⁰⁵ Until the moment of their arrival the patriarchal society of the Æsir stands untroubled and unchallenged; the norns potentially represent the emergence of a new power in the world that competes with the Æsir for universal authority. The Æsir never truly recover from this event: the appearance in the world of the active agents of fate marks the first action that dooms the gods, and what comes upon them is a fate which they spend the rest of cosmic history attempting to evade without success. Though the extant texts never supply a sufficiently intimate profile of the norns for us to be able to assess whether they are consciously pursuing enmity with the Æsir, the gods, in their constant attempts to preserve the continuation of their society, are in some sense establishing a direct opposition between themselves and the norns. The norns’ femininity thus becomes an important signifier: it emphasises the dichotomy between the patriarchal society of the Æsir and this autonomous but emphatically female alien collective. The importance of the norns to the Æsir’s sense of self is asserted across many different pieces of literature by the frequency with which the Æsir define themselves against the actions of fate and attempt to resist, postpone or otherwise avert the irresistible approach of *ragnarök*.

⁶⁰³ ‘Völuspá’ 8.

⁶⁰⁴ Kure (2010) 282–4 and Bek-Pedersen (2011) 82

⁶⁰⁵ Clunies Ross (1994a) 86.

Given this implicit sense of antagonism between the Æsir and the agents of fate, the presence of the valkyries and Skuld in Óðinn's hall is on some level problematic. The valkyries, though constrained, are nevertheless agents of a fate that the gods resist. To gain a proper understanding of the function of the valkyries in Valhöll, one can consider some of the other denizens of Óðinn's hall: the wolves Geri and Freki. These two wolves are referenced in *Grímnismál* and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, as well as being described by Snorri in *Gylfaginning*.⁶⁰⁶ Both Snorri and *Grímnismál* tell us that Óðinn subsists entirely on wine, and that he feeds his portion of the eternal feast to Geri and Freki, symbolising his feeding of the carrion-eaters on the world's battlefields. There is, however, an implied sense of threat concerning these wolves: the situation raises the question of what exactly the wolves would feed on if Óðinn did not sacrifice his share of the feast to their hunger. There is irony in the fact that Óðinn, feeder of the wolves, will himself be the food of the Fenrisúlfr at *ragnarök*.⁶⁰⁷ Symbolically, all three wolves represent the same force: that of a relentless appetite for destruction. It is a force over which Óðinn exercises only a temporary control: he can hold the wolf at bay while he has the power to feed it, but once he runs out of battles it will consume him instead. Given Geri and Freki's place of prominence within Valhöll, it is possible to see them as a related concept to the valkyries. Both represent forces over which Óðinn has partial, and importantly time-limited, control, which he exercises for his short-term benefit, but which will ultimately destroy him. It is noteworthy that Skuld's name possibly translates as either 'future' or 'debt/obligation'.⁶⁰⁸ Whose debt Skuld may represent is unclear, but given that she alone is the norn most associated with Óðinn one wonders whether it is his obligation. Like Loki, Freyja and Skaði, the norns/valkyries are a dangerous externality that has been internalised within divine society: like Loki, however, they might perhaps be at best defined as being

⁶⁰⁶ 'Grímnismál' 19, 'Helgakviða Hundingsbana I' 13, and *Gylfaginning* (2005) 32.

⁶⁰⁷ Lindow (2001) 120.

⁶⁰⁸ Orchard (1997) 151.

temporarily on the side of the gods in the mythic present. Skuld stands as a symbol of the debt that Óðinn will eventually be forced to pay: he has gained some mastery over the fate of battlefields, but in consequence he will eventually find himself on a battlefield he is unable to control and where his life will be forfeit.

3.3. The Transformed Princess

3.3.1. Introduction

The previous section (3.2.3.) discussed the prototypical figure of the valkyrie who inhabits Valhöll, but mention was made of the figure of the princess who acts as, or is transformed into, a valkyrie and who inhabits the human world: this section will analyse this figure, and how the functions of the valkyrie alter with, or are altered by, their inclusion in the human political world. A similar literary motif concerns the transformation of a princess into a troll-woman, a transformation which though superficially different can be seen to have many of the same connotations. Indeed, the motif of the transformed princess recurs often, frequently in eddic poetry and even more frequently in the *fornaldarsögur*. A number of texts depict eligible princesses who undergo a variety of physical transformations, often in such a way as to increase either the desirability or else the threat of the female figure, who becomes a figure against which kings and heroes can define the limits of their authority or heroic potential. This transformation, whether self-imposed or forced upon the princess by an external agent, effectively creates a new empowered identity.

There are, broadly speaking, two distinct kinds of transformation that princesses undergo: transformation into a valkyrie, and transformation into a troll-woman. The first of these is usually a transformation that the princess takes upon herself of her own volition, the second is usually a state imposed upon her by an external agent. Although these two states may seem diametrically opposed, in discussing each this thesis will demonstrate the similarities inherent in the two situations: both valkyrie and troll-woman are empowered beings invested in acts of destruction and death; both figures are heavily associated with sex and sexual behaviour; both situations involve the imposition of a male hero; and both situations usually resolve with the princess's return to normal humanity. It will be shown

how the changing female identity of the transformed princess allows kings and heroes to justify patriarchal practices and legitimise the authority of the male ruling elite.

3.3.2. The Princess as Valkyrie

Though some transformed princess may be thought of as valkyries, they are quite different from those that occupy Valhöll: it has been noted that, despite the literal meaning of their name, *fornaldarsögur* valkyries do little actual choosing of the slain: the emphasis of their role concerns the human dramas in which they take part.⁶⁰⁹ Indeed, more often than not these more identifiably human valkyries are seen committing insubordination towards divine will, specifically refusing to accept the death of a hero.⁶¹⁰ Consequently, the use of the term ‘valkyrie’ to denote these warrior-princesses must be justified: the terms *skjaldmær* ‘shield-maiden’ or *meykonungr* ‘maiden-king’ are also used of these women, and with greater frequency than the term ‘valkyrie’; in fact, in the *fornaldarsögur* the term ‘valkyrie’ is rarely used of these shield-maidens.⁶¹¹ They also appear in a large number of *riddarasögur*, where the term *meykonungr* is used with greatest frequency.⁶¹² The likelihood would seem to be, however, that a medieval audience would not have made any meaningful distinction between these terms.⁶¹³ Even in texts where they might be seen to be distinct figures, it seems clear that they have influenced each other in terms of their characterisation.⁶¹⁴ In particular, the *meykonungar* seem to draw much of their characterisation from the figure of Brynhildr, whose legendary character is clearly a major influence on the warrior-women of later narratives.⁶¹⁵ Others have argued, however, that

⁶⁰⁹ Bek-Pedersen (2011) 49.

⁶¹⁰ Quinn (2006) 54.

⁶¹¹ Jochens (1996) 87-107, but particularly 97-103.

⁶¹² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013b) 107.

⁶¹³ Warmind (1997) 196 and Bek-Pedersen (2011) 56. Bek-Pedersen notes, further, that there is a similar imprecision of meaning in the Old English vocabulary covering similar figures.

⁶¹⁴ Jesch (1991) 180.

⁶¹⁵ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013b) 112.

Brynhildr herself is probably a composite character that had absorbed elements of the more typical valkyrie Sigdrífa at some point.⁶¹⁶ This thesis will treat the *meykonungar* as analogous figures to the princesses who are termed ‘valkyries’, following the approach used by the scholars cited in this paragraph.

As mentioned earlier, princesses tend to transform, or be transformed, into either troll-women or valkyries: this raises the question of exactly how one distinguishes between the two. Given that both valkyries and troll-women are invested in concepts of death and destruction, and are at least initially intractable to the wishes of male characters, the only major distinction in fact seems to be the quality of sex appeal: valkyrie-princesses tend to be as beautiful as troll-princesses are repulsive. That the valkyrie-princesses and *meykonungar* are sexually desirable is demonstrated by the ardour with which they are inevitably pursued by youthful heroes, the episodes usually culminating in intercourse: Hrólfr’s pursuit of Þornbjörg in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, Helgi’s rape of Ólöf in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, another Helgi’s rough treatment at the hands of the domineering Ingibjörg in *Helga þáttir Þórisson*, and Sigrgarðr’s attempted rape of Ingigerðr in *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* are but a few cases in point.⁶¹⁷ Indeed, one of the most emotive and strangely beautiful sex scenes in the entire corpus of Old Norse literature is the tender encounter between the valkyrie Sigrún and her recently-deceased husband Helgi in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*.⁶¹⁸

This encounter between the valkyrie-princess and her dead, but still physically functional, lover is emblematic of the supernatural aid that a relationship with a valkyrie provides. As Quinn notes, the valkyrie is ‘a function of the death sentence transformed into

⁶¹⁶ Jochens (1996) 90-4.

⁶¹⁷ ‘Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar’ (1950) 97-8, ‘Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans’ (1954) 17-9, ‘Helga þáttir Þórissonar’ (1950) 347-9, *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* (2012-3) 117-9.

⁶¹⁸ ‘Helgakviða Hundingsbana II’ 40-51.

a lovely princess.’⁶¹⁹ The valkyrie represents a humanised form of death, a form that is approachable, can be related to, and above all are romantically available; if death can be won over into a loving and human relationship, then it can be mastered. The post-mortem coitus in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* symbolises the pseudo-immortality that Helgi has achieved through his romantic involvement with a valkyrie: across the entire narrative of the so-called ‘Helgi lays’, the couple are permitted to cheat final death on several occasions by being reincarnated and allowed to renew their relationship on each incarnation.⁶²⁰ As Clark has noted, these three poems are relatively understudied, but they are worth examining here for the three portraits they give of the courtship between a valkyrie and a human.⁶²¹ The tamed valkyrie represents, therefore, the triumph of a man who has overcome death itself through his masculine prowess and desirability.

It is noticeable that the other warriors who are comparable with Helgi in terms of his martial exploits but who lack a similar valkyrie bride, Atli in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* and Sinfjötli in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *II*, are both subjected to vicious insults that question their masculinity, insults of a kind that are never directed against Helgi.⁶²² It is, of course, important to consider that insults against one’s masculinity are staple aspect of the flyting, the ritual trading of insults, and one reason for why Helgi’s sexual nature or manliness are never questioned is simply because he does not engage in a flyting in these poems. It might, however, be potentially indicative of the extent to which these poems consider the love of a valkyrie as an indicator of masculine pre-eminence: Helgi’s masculinity is not questioned in the way that his male companion’s sexual nature are, as his ability to romantically satisfy the affections of this most desirable type of bride

⁶¹⁹ Quinn (2006) 54.

⁶²⁰ The ‘Helgi Lays’ are *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*. They are presented in this order in the manuscript.

⁶²¹ Clark (2012) 47.

⁶²² ‘*Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*’ 12-30, ‘*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*’ 32-44, and ‘*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*’ 19-24.

perhaps sets his masculinity beyond question. Atli and Sinfjötli are, in contrast, forced to defend their male natures to some extent.⁶²³

The sexual and supernatural desirability of the valkyrie does not, however, specifically explain why she appears as a royal female in narratives describing the human world. In some sense it is fitting that a woman who straddles the boundary between two worlds should have a similar status in both: the occupation of a functionary of fate and of the gods should be undertaken by a privileged member of the aristocracy. The texts, however, suggest a stronger connection than a simple parity of status: they seem to drawing a clear thematic link between the supernatural benefits of marriage to a valkyrie, and the real-world political benefits of marriage to a princess. The texts are careful to make a distinction between winning the valkyrie's sexual favours and obtaining her hand in legitimate marriage; in the 'Helgi lays', for example, the hero has usually obtained the valkyrie-princess's love at an early stage, but it is only once he has proved his prowess, usually in combat with his competitor suitors, that he can obtain her father's blessing for a marriage (or, in the case of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, has eliminated the father through combat so that he is no longer an obstacle to the marriage). The valkyrie herself can be seen to draw attention to this distinction:

‘Heill skaltu, vísi, virða nióta,
 áttstafr Yngva, ok una lífi,
 er þú felt hefir inn flugar trauða
 iðfur, þann er olli ægis dauða!

Ok þér, buðlungr, samir bæði vel

⁶²³ For a thorough analysis and discussion of the homosexual/homosocial implications of these *flytings*, see Clark (2012) 50-66. Larrington (2011) 174 has suggested that the troll-woman who insults Sinfjötli, and who seems to be his *fylgja* to some extent, may in fact represent the warrior's own jealousy over Helgi's sexual match: this is a reading which, if correct, further emphasises the valkyrie as the pre-eminent sexual partner for an aspiring warrior.

rauðir baugar ok in ríkja mæR.
 Heill skaltu, buðlungR, bæði nióta
 Högna dóttur ok Hringstaða,
 sigrs ok landa! þá er sókn lokit.'

[‘Unbroken, prince, you shall have the benefit of your men, descendent of Yngvi,
 and be content with life, as you have felled the prince averse to flight, he who
 caused the death of a sea-giant.

And, prince, both red-gold rings and the powerful maiden well befit you;
 unbroken, prince, you shall have the benefit of both Högni’s daughter and
 Hringstaðir, victory and lands, when the battle has finished!.’]⁶²⁴

These words of the valkyrie Sigrún, declared to her lover Helgi from the skies above a battlefield over which she has presided, make clear this distinction between supernatural favours and real-world legitimate authority. Helgi has already had her blessing and protection in battle, but it is only now that he has defeated the last of the other suitors that he has merited acquiring Sigrún as a legitimate bride and the advantages that go with that: the role of her father, King Högni, in the arrangement of the marriage contract is drawn to attention by her reference to herself as her father’s daughter. In the final stanza, Sigrún reinforces this distinction by twice contrasting a supernatural reward with a material one: Helgi has deserved both *rauðir baugar* ‘red-gold rings’ and the *ríkja mæR* ‘mighty maiden’, and has won *sigs* ‘victory’ and *landa* ‘lands’. The implication is that the supernatural aid of the valkyrie is partnered with the economic and territorial gain.⁶²⁵ If conquest of the valkyrie represents the triumph of the hero over death, then conquest of the

⁶²⁴ ‘Helgakviða Hundingsbana I’ 55-6.

⁶²⁵ Another reading of this situation could be that the economic rewards associated with marrying a valkyrie possible replace the supernatural rewards that predate the marriage. Quinn (2006) 55 notes that the valkyries’ supernatural powers seem to diminish after they marry.

princess represents the hero's assumption of high social status and economic independence: the empowered female, both supernaturally and politically, becomes a means through which a hero can obtain mastery of his fate through independence and absolute self-governance. By becoming the 'ideal warrior-prince', Helgi has earned the right to everything that Sigrún as both princess and valkyrie represents.⁶²⁶

The *fornaldarsögur* explore this concept at greater length than is possible in eddic poetry; an example would be *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, an entertaining *fornaldarsaga* with serious undertones.⁶²⁷ In this text, the supernatural qualities of the *meykonungr* Þornbjörg are present but played subtly: several references are made to her wisdom and knowledge, but the only explicit manifestation of the supernatural protection she bestows on her husband comes when she dons her armour to lead an army to rescue him from an Irish prison, she having had supernatural foreknowledge of his imprisonment.⁶²⁸ Apart from these supernatural qualities, she habitually dresses in armour and has a reputation for violently dispatching any suitor who seeks her hand. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has argued that a premium is placed on Þornbjörg's supernatural wisdom;⁶²⁹ in fact, more emphasis is laid on the economic possibilities she presents as a bride for Hrólfr. Þornbjörg's father, King Eirekr, makes it clear that whilst Hrólfr is an impressive man on his own merits, his royal credentials are not good enough for him to be considered a suitable husband for Þornbjörg under normal circumstances:

Konungr mælti: "Ekki kann ek Hrólfi at ætla þessa dul eða öðrum þeim konungi, er svá litlu ríki stýrir, þar sem áður hafa beðit hennar þeir konungar, er haft hafa undir sik aðra skattkonunga, ok far ekki, frú, með slíka draumóra."

⁶²⁶ Clark (2012) 57.

⁶²⁷ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2010) 69-70.

⁶²⁸ 'Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar' (1950) 151-3.

⁶²⁹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2010) 72-4 and (2013) 26.

[The King said: “I do not expect this self-deception from Hrólfr or any other king who rules so small a realm, given that those kings who have had under them other tributary kings have already asked for her in marriage; and do not have anything to do, lady, with such fantasies.”]⁶³⁰

The king’s tone is contemptuous, and it is clear that he considers Hrólfr’s marital ambitions not only risible but also socially inappropriate. Were Þornbjörg a regular princess whose marriage capital was under her father’s control, Hrólfr would not even be considered as marriage material. Þornbjörg’s violent nature as a *meykonungr*, however, changes the situation in such a way as to force the king to compromise, eventually making Hrólfr the following offer:

‘Nú vil ek efna þat allt, sem ek hefi yðr heitit, ok unna yðr, Hrólfr konungr, þessa ráðs með því ríki, sem vér höfum henni í vald gefit, þar til er vér látum af landstjórn, en síðan skulu þér taka allt þetta ríki eptir várn dag, ef þér fáíð hana unnit.’

[‘Now I will perform everything that I have promised you, and not grudge you, King Hrólfr, this marriage along with that realm which we have given into her charge, until we desist from the governance of the land, and then you shall take all this kingdom after our day, if you are able to love her.’]⁶³¹

Hrólfr, suddenly, stands to inherit absolute control of a powerful kingdom if he succeeds in conquering his *meykonungr*. In this case, the potential economic rewards of marrying a princess are not separate from her function as a *meykonungr*: rather, it is only made possible because she is a *meykonungr*. Were she a normal princess who conformed to a more socially acceptable female role, Hrólfr would not have had the opportunity to try for her hand. Should he manage to win her, however, he will not only feel the benefit of her

⁶³⁰ ‘Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar’ (1950) 73.

⁶³¹ ‘Hrólfs saga’ (1950) 90-1.

supernatural protection but she will also be his means to economic and political power that in all other respects would be beyond his grasp. From a narrative perspective the *meykonungr* is not only a figure who motivates the plot of the saga, but is also a means of justifying the credentials of the hero: her body becomes a nexus of both supernatural and political power, but for it to be accessed the militaristic and masculine aspects of her nature must be tamed to the hero's will, and her powers and the potentialities of her *meykonungr* identity must be subsumed under masculine authority. Importantly, the saga in no way stigmatises Þorbjörg's decision to take up her masculine armour once again when she has to save her husband; by this point it has become socially acceptable that she do so, in view of her normative role as wife.⁶³² She must be transformed into what the worldview expressed through the sagas considers a normal, which is to say subordinate, role in a marriage: her premarital behaviour, which would be more typically demonstrated by a male protagonist, must in essence be negated by the superior manliness of an actual man.⁶³³

The sexual unlocking of the *meykonungr*'s body and the redefinition of her social role are linked to the nature of her transformation. The *fornaldarsögur*, to a greater degree than eddic poetry dealing with analogous valkyrie-princesses, lay emphasis on the degree to which the *meykonungr* state is a physical transformation: it is a subtle one that moves along gender lines, whereby the empowered woman takes on various masculine qualities that serve to destabilise her female image; this can be conveyed in an inconspicuous fashion, such as Sigurðr's initial mistaking of the armoured Brynhildr for a man in *Völsunga saga* or the narrative's suggestive use of male pronouns for Hervör in *Hervarar saga* once she takes on a male disguise, or the transformation can be conveyed explicitly

⁶³² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2010) 77.

⁶³³ McKinnell (2005) 7.

by the woman herself, as with Þornbjörg.⁶³⁴ This conceit also recalls Skaði's adoption of masculine qualities, notably her costume, in her invasion of the Æsir's territory, discussed previously (in 2.3.3.).⁶³⁵ Not only is the male pronoun used of Þornbjörg in her armoured state, but she herself demands that her subjects treat her as a male and refer to her as King Þórbergr.⁶³⁶ Not only is she adopting a male identity, she is doing her utmost to efface her female one. That this change is indeed a form of transformation is underscored by the fact that it can be reversed, and the *meykonungr* can be returned to an idealised and entirely feminine state. The *meykonungr* form is a manifestation of an aberrant gender role that the hero must redefine into a standard female role as part of the process of obtaining the her power for himself: he must prove the pre-eminence of his masculine qualities by suppressing her masculine impulses and re-affirming her female identity. From a narrative perspective, there is a sense that her powers only attain their true value if they are subsumed under male authority: the creation of this transformed and empowered female identity, and the gender dynamics of the process by which her powers are broken down, reconstructed and reconfigured, serves as a means for heroes and kings to define themselves by their opposition to, and later conquest of, the *meykonungr*.

3.3.3. The Princess as Troll-Woman

As with the term 'valkyrie', the designation 'troll-woman' is one that potentially covers a large number of different supernatural females.⁶³⁷ These figures range from the dangerous avatars of chaos imbued with eschatological significance who oppose the gods, to brutish and unintelligent ogres who haunt the caves and woods of the world preying on the men who are unfortunate enough to encounter them: the troll-princess falls somewhere within

⁶³⁴ 'Völsunga saga' (1954) 157, 'Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks' (1950) 13, 'Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar' (1950) 62-4.

⁶³⁵ Jesch (1991) 139.

⁶³⁶ 'Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar' (1950) 64.

⁶³⁷ Ármann Jakobsson (2008b) 44-55

this spectrum.⁶³⁸ The transformation of a princess into a troll-woman is a recurring trope in the *fornaldarsögur*, indeed Jochens has noted that the word *tröll* occurs more frequently in that genre than in any other.⁶³⁹ It is a transformation that is unknown in extant eddic material except perhaps imagined in one of the threats laid against Gerðr in *Skírnismál* (discussed in 2.3.2), but in any case the term *tröll* is itself rarely used in eddic literature.⁶⁴⁰ Examples of the princess transformed into a troll can be found in *Bósa saga*, *Illuga saga* *Gríðarfostra*, and *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, the last two of which will be focused on in this analysis.⁶⁴¹

The texts lay more emphasis on the princess's transformation into a troll than is the case with transformation into a valkyrie: not only is the physical transformation more evident, the saga writer often indulging in painting as grotesque a physical appearance as imagination will allow, but the transformed state is not usually one chosen by the princess herself but rather one explicitly imposed upon her by an external agent. In the case of both *Illuga saga* and *Gríms saga*, the princesses are victims of the witchcraft of their step-mothers.

The figure of the wicked, magical step-mother appears in many *fornaldarsögur*. She is a complicated figure who gives rise to a number of tensions concerning the use and fragility of male royal power; I have previously written at length about these step-mother figures.⁶⁴² Though this figure has considerable agency, which is expressed in numerous ways, the present study's focus is on her action of transforming her step-daughter(s) into something different from their natural state. The action of the evil step-mother is highly political: the transformation of the king's legitimate daughter represents a hampering of the

⁶³⁸ Ármann Jakobsson (2009) 185 notes that there is a sense that trolls have changed nature in the transition from edda to saga, with a noticeable trend moving from the former to the latter type of troll.

⁶³⁹ Jochens (1996) 126.

⁶⁴⁰ Arnold (2005) 116.

⁶⁴¹ 'Bósa saga ok Herrauðs' (1950) 299-300, 'Illuga saga Gríðarfostri' (1950) 420-2, 'Gríms saga loðinkinna' (1950) 193-4.

⁶⁴² Varley (2010).

dynasty by rendering the princess's marriage capital invalid. Arnold has argued that, unlike valkyries, troll-women cannot be tamed and thus must be exterminated;⁶⁴³ whilst this is accurate concerning true troll-women, the narrative purpose of the troll-princess is to be overcome and tamed. The transformation into a troll-woman prevents the princess from being a marriageable commodity until such time as the curse is undone. Not only are political alliances through marriage unable to be formed, but no further heirs can be produced by the princess in her transformed state. The step-mother has seized control of the princess's marriage capital, taking it away from the king.

The emphasis on the sexual value of the princess is made clear, even in her transformed state:

En er hann hafði eigi lengi legit, sá hann, hvar kona gekk, ef svá skyldi kalla. Hún var eigi hæri en sjau vetra gamlar stúlkur, en svá digr, at Grímr hugði, at hann mundi eigi geta feðmt um hana. Hún var langleit ok harðleit, bjúgnefjuð ok baröxluð, svartleit ok svipilkinnuð, fúlleit ok framsnoðin. Svört var hún bæði á hár ok á hörund. Hún var í skörpum skinnstakki. Hann tók eigi lengra en á þjóhnappa henni á baki. Harðla ókyssilig þótti honum hún vera, því at hordingullinn hekk ofan fyrir hváptana á henni.

[‘But when (Grímr) had not been lying there long, he saw a woman coming, if she might be so called. She was no taller than girls of seven years old, but so fat that Grímr thought he could not have put his arms around her. She was long in the face and hard in the face, hook-nosed and hump-backed, black-faced and wobbly-cheeked, foul-faced and bald at the front. She was black both of hair and skin. She was in a shrivelled leather cloak. It reached no farther than her buttocks at the back.

⁶⁴³ Arnold (2005) 123.

He thought her to be very unkissable because a snotball was hanging down in front of her mouth.’]⁶⁴⁴

This is the moment in *Gríms saga* when Grímr, the young and vigorous hero, sees his betrothed princess Lofthæna in her troll form, though he is unaware of her identity. It has been argued that troll-women function as an exotic and erotic social other, and the same is true of the princess in her transformed state.⁶⁴⁵ Despite Lofthæna’s grotesque appearance, even in this initial meeting her body is being rendered in sexual terms, with attention being drawn to her erotic qualities: she is too fat to be embraced, too mucous-ridden to be kissed, and the allusion to the shortness of her smock hints suggestively at genital exposure.

Although this serves as a humorous and ironic foreshadowing of the fact that Grímr will shortly have to engage in sexual activity with Lofthæna, it nevertheless says something profound about Grímr’s expectations of female attributes, and by extension those of all men. It is he who sexualises her new identity, who relates her grossness to his own sexual expectations and experiences: it is not that she is too fat to be embraced, but specifically that she is so fat that he doubts that he personally would be able to embrace her.

Lofthæna’s aberrant body is consequently keyed into a discourse of male desire and need: Grímr responds to her sexually, because ultimately it is his sexual act that will redefine her transformed state, returning her to a normality which is both embraceable and kissable.⁶⁴⁶

With Gerðr and Skaði it was previously argued that the male Æsir are responsible for sexualising these figures (in 2.3.2 and 2.3.3.); the same, in a sense, is true here, as it is specifically Grímr’s gaze that draws attention to Lofthæna’s sexual attributes. Although

⁶⁴⁴ ‘Gríms saga loðinkinna’ (1950) 191.

⁶⁴⁵ Arnold (2005) 123.

⁶⁴⁶ This scenario, and to a lesser extent the one from *Illuga saga* that will be described below, is of course in some sense a manifestation of the common motif of the loathly lady that appears that can be found in many European literary sources from across the Middle Ages; for a description of this motif in its wider European context, see Garry and El-Shamy (2005) 130. Whilst it seems likely that the *fornaldarsögur*, in portraying these transformed princesses, are borrowing the motif from continental romance, it is still worth examining here: whatever the source for the idea, the writers and compilers of this literary material clearly thought its inclusion appropriate, and in politicising the transformation they work the motif into a uniquely Nordic frame of reference.

she requires that he have sex with her in order to cure her of her transformation, Grímr's gaze nevertheless ensures that the initial consideration of, and impetus for, sex comes from him.

As with the scenario of the valkyrie-princess or *meykonungr*, it is necessary for the hero prove himself worthy of the troll-princess, and this usually involves the dual proving of the hero's martial and sexual prowess. In *Gríms saga*, Grímr proves himself in martial prowess even before he encounters the transformed Lofthæna: he defeats a pair of troll-women singlehanded.⁶⁴⁷ This is an important detail: he has proved his strength and bravery by defeating two typical specimens of the category of being that his future wife has been transformed into: his overcoming of these two more prototypical troll-women foreshadow his eventual ability to overthrow the transformed state, and parallels the valkyrie-princess's lover and his need to out-male her. In this respect, the hero is exactly like the Æsir in terms of his relationships with trolls/giants: they exist either to be killed or to have sex with.⁶⁴⁸ It represents the hero's opposition and successful refutation of all the many negative qualities that trolls stand for.⁶⁴⁹

This event is immediately followed by Grímr's severe wounding in a fight over a beached whale.⁶⁵⁰ From a narrative perspective, this episode is simply a convenient method of putting Grímr at Lofthæna's mercy: that he has bested, without injury, two terrible troll women but is then mortally wounded in a mundane scuffle with some opportunistic humans seems scarcely credible. Rather, it serves to introduce the troll-princess and specifically draw attention to her healing arts. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has argued that this healing ability represents some kind of acquired medical art, but given that it is used to save Grímr's life after battle I am more inclined to suggest that it parallels the life-giving

⁶⁴⁷ 'Gríms saga loðinkinna' (1950) 186-90.

⁶⁴⁸ Clunies Ross (1993) 493.

⁶⁴⁹ For a thorough discussion of these, see Ármann Jakobsson (2008) 44-55.

⁶⁵⁰ 'Gríms saga loðinkinna' (1950) 190-1.

and life-protecting qualities of the valkyrie.⁶⁵¹ In order, however, to have access to Lofthæna's healing powers, Grímr must meet her terms: he must sleep with her, despite his repulsion from her physical appearance.⁶⁵² As in the case of the valkyrie-princess, there is a sense that the troll-princess is putting herself forward as the dominant party, a position that must be reversed by Grímr's assertion of his masculine credentials in the sexual act: by returning her to the passive party in sexual congress, he returns her to her human form. It has been noted that marital status seems to have a profound impact on the nature of female beings in Old Norse literature;⁶⁵³ nowhere is this idea more literally expressed than in the retransformation of the troll-princess.

When he has proved himself in terms of physical strength and sexual potency, Lofthæna returns to her human form. Grímr takes her home, where his first act is to execute her step-mother.⁶⁵⁴ The political dynamic is evident: the step-mother having asserted her control over the princess's marriage capital by essentially placing it beyond accessible bounds, her termination is Grímr's assertion of his claim, by right of conquest, to Lofthæna's marriage capital.⁶⁵⁵ Grímr's marriage to Lofthæna is accepted, and as with the scenario of the valkyrie-princess the hero's redefinition of the troll-princess has been a means to political power and economic freedom. It is only once she is cured of the troll-state that she can be made socially acceptable, and the hero can not only claim his marital rights but also the prestige and wealth of her family.⁶⁵⁶

⁶⁵¹ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013b) 31.

⁶⁵² Though the troll-princess is not a true troll, but merely the victim of sorcery, her dominant sesxual nature, and indeed that of the valkyrie-princess potentially, may reflect the traditional idea that 'true' trolls and giantesses were sexually voracious: see Jochens (1996) 54.

⁶⁵³ Tally Lionarons (2005) 272.

⁶⁵⁴ 'Gríms saga loðinkinna' (1950) 194

⁶⁵⁵ Another reading of the situation might be that the killing of the step-mother represents the death of Grímr's own mother figure as a symbolic gesture towards his own liberation as an independent male, the idea of which was discussed at length with regard to Þórr (in 1.2.2.). For more general notes on this narrative pattern, see McKinnell (2005) 143-4.

⁶⁵⁶ Kress (2002) 85-6. Kress is referring specifically to this saga, but acknowledges that her point applies to a more general pattern.

A similar scenario is posited in *Illuga saga Gríðarfostra*, which makes some interesting changes to the trope of the troll-princess. A princess named Signý is transformed by her wicked step-mother into a troll-woman named Gríðr, but she herself already has a daughter named Hildr, from a earlier relationship, who is sent into exile with her.⁶⁵⁷ Gríðr is described physically in very similar terms to Lofthæna but, unlike her, when the hero Illugi encounters Gríðr she is openly antagonistic towards him.⁶⁵⁸ *Illuga saga* effectively and cleverly combines the dual proving of courage and sexual prowess: invited to have sex with Hildr, Illugi is several times dragged from his bed, mid-coitus, by Gríðr and threatened with her sharp knife.⁶⁵⁹ Though there are some broad comic strokes being used here in view of the fact that this treatment in no way prevents him from performing sexually with Hildr, it nevertheless serves effectively to demonstrate both his courage and virility. His sexual potency and bravery are tested simultaneously, whilst the threat posed by the troll-princess is firmly foregrounded, which also serves to relate her to the violent behaviour of some of the valkyrie-princesses.

Having successfully overcome the troll-princess's trial, she revealing that he is the seventeenth hero to have undergone it and the only one to have survived the ordeal, Illugi is told of Gríðr's history, in which it is revealed that her step-mother's curse not only transformed her physically into a troll-woman but that her compulsive desire to do violence to heroic young men is also a product of that transformation: the aberration is as much mental as it is physical.⁶⁶⁰ Illugi learns, however, that unlike the previous sixteen heroes he has proved worthy and has consequently set in motion the events that will restore Gríðr to her original form and mentality. As a direct magical consequence of the breaking of the spell, the witch-queen spontaneously combusts and Illugi is able to restore both

⁶⁵⁷ 'Illuga saga Gríðarfostri' (1950) 420-2.

⁶⁵⁸ 'Illuga saga' 417-8.

⁶⁵⁹ 'Illuga saga' 419-20.

⁶⁶⁰ 'Illuga saga' 421.

Gríðr (now Signý once again) and Hildr to the real world. As a result of this, Illugi is able to marry Hildr; although he does not actually marry the troll-princess figure, he nevertheless obtains the exclusive right to arrange a marriage for Signý.⁶⁶¹ In marrying her off to a powerful king, Sigurðr, Illugi is consequently able to make a familial alliance with a powerful and wealthy royal family, thus using his ability to redefine the troll-princess as a means of obtaining a economic wealth and political power.

It can, in conclusion, be seen that the valkyrie-princess and the troll-princess have much in common. In both cases, the identity of the princess is able to be redefined by herself or those around her as a means of directing her economic and supernatural potential. The possible rewards that can be obtained through redefining a transformed princess are considerable. In the case of the valkyrie-princess, her transformation links her into the tradition of the powerful goddess of life and death, and consequently gaining the favour of a valkyrie-princess gives a male hero some ability to defy fate. The tradition of the troll-princess echoes that of the valkyrie-princess, for despite that fact that troll-women generally are not associated with the supporting of heroes, the troll-princess, like her valkyrie counterpart, possesses the ability to support and sustain the life of a hero. The supernatural aid and protection of the transformed princess is, in this literature, also tied into the economic potentialities of her social position: marriage to her becomes a means of obtaining wealth and social standing that would otherwise be out of reach for the hero. In each case, the final transformation of the princess is the most important: it is the male hero who causes the effect, which is to redefine the princess back into her original state. Although the princess is returned to her original identity, it is an identity reconstructed for her, and implicitly sustained by, male will, which is confirmed by the fact that, after this final transformation, the power and status the princess possessed before or during her transformation comes under the control of that male. The redefinition of the valkyrie-

⁶⁶¹ 'Illuga saga' 423-4.

princess or troll-princess is, ultimately, a means of seizing her independent power and making it serve a male purpose.

3.4. The Figure of the Seeress

3.4.1. Introduction

The figure of the *völva* is one that has already been touched on several times, most notably in 1.3.3. with regard to how her presence informs our understanding of Óðinn's character. The effect of the power of prophecy, with which the *völva* is associated, has also been examined with regard to how it affects our reading of figures such as Frigg and Freyja (in 2.2.2. and 2.4.2. respectively). The figure of the *völva* herself, however, is one deeply entrenched in the Old Norse imagination, though some have argued that her prophetic powers may have been a relatively late addition to a figure more associated with spell-making.⁶⁶² In consequence of the frequency with which this character type appears, the figure of the *völva* has generated a great deal of academic study.⁶⁶³ What will follow below is a discussion of the typical *völva* as a character in her own right, with a particular focus on the ways in which male characters approach her and can be seen to be engaged in a process of shaping her role, as an agent of fate to suit their own needs.

If examined in this way, the *völur* can be seen to possess a related function to that of the *norns*, and to a lesser extent the *valkyries*, described in the previously (in 3.2.2. and 3.2.3).⁶⁶⁴ They represent the tangible presence of fate, but can be interacted with on a personal and human level. Like the *norns* and *valkyries*, the *völur* straddle the human and divine worlds, having relevance to both and fulfilling a similar function in both. Unlike the *norns*, who are always portrayed with a sense of distance from the main characters of any story, the *völur* are both independent and immediate to the action. They are also usually depicted as solitary figures, unlike the collective nature of the other women discussed in

⁶⁶² Samplonius (2001) 228.

⁶⁶³ An exhaustive list would be immense, but prominent recent studies include Boyer (1986), Morris (1991), Jochens (1996) 113-31, McKinnell (2001), Price (2002) 91-232, Quinn (2002), Mitchell (2003), McKinnell (2003), Tally Lionarons (2005) 293-7, Dillmann (2006), Ármann Jakobsson (2007), Ármann Jakobsson (2008b), Mitchell (2011), Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013b) 47-58. For a summary of important but older studies, see Mitchell (2011) 4 ff.

⁶⁶⁴ Jochens (1996) 113.

this section.⁶⁶⁵ They inevitably come into contact with prominent males, who either seek them out or are forced by circumstance into their company.

This section will begin with an examination of Óðinn's relationship with the *völur*, demonstrating the ways in which he can actively be seen to engaged in defining their characters and abilities, and how these female figures react to Óðinn's presumptions about them. This will lead into a discussion of the portrayal of the *völur* in the *fornaldarsögur*, which will show how the concerns expressed in eddic poetry dealing with the Æsir's relationship with witches translate into the human sphere.

3.4.2. Óðinn and the *Völur*

In texts set in the world of the gods, there is one figure who is overwhelmingly associated with visits to the *völur*: Óðinn. This is, in part, a consequence of Óðinn's characteristic compulsion to seek wisdom and knowledge (discussed at length in 1.3.3.). Unlike many of Óðinn's sources of information, the literary *völur* had real-world counterparts: human women of alleged supernatural ability who occupied positions of importance in Scandinavian society both before and after the Conversion.⁶⁶⁶ This gives rise to a number of interesting differences between the ways in which the *völur* are portrayed in mythological literature and our understanding of their social position in real-world society suggested by contemporary accounts and archaeological evidence. Óðinn is forced to seek out the *völur* with whom he interacts, who do not seem to possess the itinerant characteristics associated with *völur* in the human world, both literary and real.⁶⁶⁷ This seems unique to Óðinn, as even the male *fornaldarsögur* heroes have the *völur* appear as unwanted guests in their homes (see 3.4.3).

⁶⁶⁵ Tally Lionarons (2005) 294.

⁶⁶⁶ Mitchell (2011) 16-73 and Price (2002) 112-6.

⁶⁶⁷ Jochens (1996) 116.

Another significant difference between the real world and fictionalised portrayals of the *völur* concerns their relationship with Óðinn; the archaeological evidence suggests that the practices of the real-world *völur* were closely associated with Óðinn worship.⁶⁶⁸ There is an obvious logic to this, in view of Óðinn's association with *seiðr* and other related magical practices: he may not be the originator of magical abilities, nor possess a perfect mastery of them, but as a figure of human worship he is the most accessible repository of magical aid and knowledge. The relationship between the *völur* and Óðinn in fictional accounts, however, is unfriendly; as McKinnell has noted, the *völur* are portrayed with a consistent and universal antagonism towards Óðinn that counters the suggested closeness of their real-world association.⁶⁶⁹ Given this apparent disparity between real-world and fictional examples of *völur* behaviour, this section will attempt to suggest some of the reasons why Old Norse writers might have chosen to portray such a starkly competitive dichotomy between these magically empowered women and the divine patriarch who encounters them.

Óðinn's two major encounters with *völur* are recounted in the eddic poems *Völuspá* and *Baldurs draumar*, the similarities between the two poems suggesting that one has influenced the other or else that they both draw on the same tradition.⁶⁷⁰ This scenario seems to have been part of an established tradition, as a number of medieval artefacts have been argued to illustrate this meeting between god and *völva*.⁶⁷¹ A third poem which must be considered is *Hyndluljóð*, which despite depicting a conversation between a giantess and Freyja nevertheless shares much of its tone and content with the other poems, and

⁶⁶⁸ See, for example, the numerous Odinic artefacts excavated from suspected *völur* graves, discussed in Price (2002) 162 ff.

⁶⁶⁹ McKinnell (2001) 398 ff.

⁶⁷⁰ Simek (1993) 30-1.

⁶⁷¹ Dobat (2006) 185-6.

reflects interestingly on the *völva*-and-interlocutor dynamic.⁶⁷² Indeed, McKinnell has argued that *Hyndluljóð* is ‘obviously indebted’ to *Völuspá*, linking these two poems and *Baldurs draumar* together in a shared tradition despite their differing manuscript provenances.⁶⁷³ This section will follow Quinn in asserting:

By studying [these three poems] together, and by examining the different representations of the *völva* according to the identity and mythological traits of her interlocutor, the composition of her audience and the subject of her recitation, a clearer picture emerges of the *völva*’s function in the mythological scheme.⁶⁷⁴

These poems provide three different views on the function of the *völva* and her interaction with other figures, but I do not agree with Quinn’s further assertion that the character of the *völva* herself is unimportant and that her ‘presence is imagined almost exclusively as voice.’⁶⁷⁵ The character of the *völva* herself and how it is constructed, I would argue, is essential to understanding the content of these three poems.

The conceit of all three poems is in essence the same: a man seeking knowledge of the future, or in the case of *Hyndluljóð* a goddess acting as patron for a man, travels to a female figure gifted with foresight, who must be tricked or persuaded to divulge her knowledge. The similarities and differences between these three connected poems allow for an exploration of the portrayal and role of the *völva* in divine society, which will be discussed here.

Hyndluljóð, with its inset but probably originally separate poem *Völuspá in skamma*, superficially reflects a different gender dynamic by the fact that both the *völva*-figure and her interlocutor are female.⁶⁷⁶ Despite the probable separate origin of the

⁶⁷² The suitability of connecting these three poems is shown in, for example, Quinn (2002).

⁶⁷³ McKinnell (2005) 89.

⁶⁷⁴ Quinn (2002) 248.

⁶⁷⁵ Quinn (2002) 248.

⁶⁷⁶ Simek (1993) 169 & 367.

Völuspá in skamma section, the poem can be seen to function as a coherent whole, and that is how it will be treated here.⁶⁷⁷ One could argue that given Freyja's function as a proxy for her lover Óttarr, the poem in fact reflects the usual set-up of a male figure approaching a seeress as a means to knowledge. Given, however, the fact that Óttarr has a silent role and lacks a proper physical presence in the poem due to his temporary transformation into a boar, and given the extent to which Freyja is characterised and her personality developed, this is a reductive argument. The poem plays on the shared femaleness of its two main figures in the opening lines:

‘Vaki, mæR meYja! vaki, mín vina,
Hyndla systir, er í helli býr!
nú er røkkR røkkra: ríða vit skolom
til Valhallar, ok til vés heilags.

Biðiom HeriaföðR í hugom sitia;
hann geldr ok gefr gull verðungo:
gaf hann Hermóði hiálm ok brynio,
en Sigmundi sverð at þiggia.

Gefr hann sigr *sumom*, en *sumom* aura,
mælsko mǫrgom ok manvit, firom;
byri gefr hann brøgnom, en brag skáldom,
gefr hann mansemi mǫrgom rekki.’

⁶⁷⁷ Steinsland (1991) 242-3.

[‘Wake up, maiden of maidens! Wake up, my friend, Hyndla, sister, who lives in the cavern! It is now the twilight of twilights: we two shall ride to Valhöll, and to the holy sanctuary.

Let us ask Herjaföðr to be of good cheer; he gives and pays out gold to his retinue: he gave Hermóðr a helmet and byrnie, and to Sigmundr a sword to accept.

He gives victory to some, to some riches, eloquence and common sense to many men; he gives fair wind to sailors, the art of poetry to skalds, he gives manliness to many a warrior.’]⁶⁷⁸

These three opening stanzas present a multilayered and complex social situation that is divided along gender lines. Freyja’s attempt to win Hyndla’s cooperation initially rests on an appeal to their shared gender: Hyndla is the *mær meyja* ‘maiden of maidens’, a phrase that lays emphasis on the importance and pre-eminence of the addressee’s female nature. Immediately following this, Freyja establishes her own similar credentials: in referring to the giantess as *systir* ‘sister’, Freyja includes herself in this notional ‘maiden of maidens’ grouping, an act which in essence attempts to forge a sense of alliance and camaraderie between her and Hyndla.

This is compounded by Freyja’s next suggestion which combines the two participants into the same action, a mutual journey to seek a mutual reward. The importance of pre-established social gender roles is, however, confirmed by the intention of this journey, and it is Freyja who is seen to be acting for the voice of patriarchy. Though the god is absent as a physical presence in this poem, Freyja’s invocation of Óðinn expresses his influence over the situation, making him an invisible participant in this exchange, which contrasts with his overt and physically present role in the other two poems under discussion. Freyja’s characterisation of Óðinn is psychologically interesting: the female figures must approach him in supplication to beg his blessing; the phrase *í*

⁶⁷⁸ ‘Hyndlolióð’ 1-3.

hugom sitia can be translated as ‘to be charitable’, but an alternative translation might be ‘to sit in a position of benevolence/kindness’, a wording which emphasises Óðinn’s control and aristocratic bearing.⁶⁷⁹ Óðinn’s role as a patron in this situation emphasises and reinforces the primacy of male roles within society more generally: he dispenses the apparatus of economic and military success to men. Freyja’s stratagem is to gain access to Hyndla’s knowledge by displacing the giantess from her native and marginal location in the cavern and bringing her within the physical surroundings of Óðinn’s hall; in so doing, Freyja will be placing Hyndla in a more conventional female role, that of supplicant to a patriarch who oversees a society in which masculine success is the paramount concern (paralleling the domestication of the valkyries discussed in 3.2.3.). If Freyja can persuade Hyndla that Óðinn’s material and spiritual boons have value to her, then the giantess’s knowledge can be accessed via economic transaction. To compound further this sense of the attempted adoption of Hyndla into Æsir culture, Freyja also offers to intercede with Þórr on her behalf in such a way that Hyndla will become exempt from the wrath Þórr habitually shows towards giantesses, another offer which works to separate Hyndla from her native grouping and transform her into something more acceptable to divine society. Though there is no mention of marriage, the invitation to Hyndla parallels the way in which Skaði and possibly Freyja herself have been brought into divine society as a way of negating their threat and harnessing their power (see 2.3.3. and 2.4.2.); at liberty, the figure of the giantess is always a threat to patriarchy.⁶⁸⁰

The irony, of course, is that these things are valueless to Hyndla: she neither wants nor needs the things that Freyja offers. It is due to the fact that she is separate from the Æsir that she has access to the only factor which she and Freyja both value in the poem, which is knowledge. Hyndla’s rejection of Freyja is not a rejection of the goddess *per se*,

⁶⁷⁹ La Farge and Tucker (1992) 231.

⁶⁸⁰ Kress (2002) 84.

but rather a rejection of the social forces she is currently representing, symbolised by the functions of Óðinn and Þórr; Hyndla resists her own sublimation and redefinition into a masculine social discourse. Though Hyndla does eventually reveal her knowledge to Freyja, she does so on her own terms; it is noticeable as well that Freyja ultimately triumphs, not because of recourse to masculine aid or protection, but by the utilisation of her own considerable independent female power.⁶⁸¹ Though she ultimately loses what she desires, ownership of Óttarr, Hyndla is in some sense successful insofar as she has dispelled the image of patriarchy: Freyja leaves the poem as dominant and powerful alpha-woman, her male ward still a silent and transmuted commodity. McKinnell has argued that Hyndla emerges as Freyja's 'dark sister', a model of Freyja herself who is distinguished only in the possessing of esoteric knowledge.⁶⁸² If this the case, then the poem ends by foregrounding independent female power in the form of these two 'sisters', connected by their mutual independence in the dénouement, in much the same way they were connected in the opening stanzas as mutual supplicants to patriarchal authority.

Baldrs draumar presents an account of Óðinn himself summoning a *völva*. This undertaking is ultimately an aborted one: the *völva* is initially reluctant to speak, and once she discovers the identity of her interlocutor she refuses any further questioning and dismisses Óðinn from her presence, making this a relatively short poem.⁶⁸³ Whilst Hyndla and Freyja are to some extent evenly matched in view of the latter's own formidable powers, in the case of *Baldrs draumar* the power dynamic is noticeably lopsided. Though there was an attempt to displace Hyndla by bringing her within the territory of the Æsir, no similar attempt is made concerning the *völva*; in fact, the poem devotes three whole stanzas to describing the arduous journey and necromantic practices that Óðinn must undertake

⁶⁸¹ 'Hyndlolióð' 48-50.

⁶⁸² McKinnell (2005) 90.

⁶⁸³ 'Baldrs draumar' 13-14.

merely to gain access to the *völva*.⁶⁸⁴ What power Óðinn has in the poem is limited to his ability always to ask one further question, symbolised by his recurring refrain of '*Pegiattu, völv! þik vil ek fregna, / unz all kunna, vil ek enn vita*' 'Do not be silent, *völva*! I wish to question you until I know all, I wish to know more.'⁶⁸⁵ By the repetition of this phrase, it is implied that Óðinn has obtained some kind of magical command over the *völva*, that he is able to force her to speak to him: it has the sense of a magical chant or charm, and the reader is perhaps invited to imagine that it is some part of his necromancy. This control, however, is ultimately demonstrated to be illusory: once the *völva* has discovered Óðinn's identity, he is no longer able to command information from her.

This sense of the illusion of control is fundamentally important to understanding the subtleties of the poem: Óðinn's refrain, mirroring as it does a similar refrain from the *völva* insisting on her reluctance to speak, gives a superficial impression that the god is wholly in control of the situation, that the patriarch has in some sense subjected this powerful and alien woman to his authority.⁶⁸⁶ He can be seen, in essence, to be spinning the situation in such a way as implicitly to redefine the *völva* as a figure under his command. Once the *völva* realises who she is talking to and consequently refuses any more information, however, the previous dialogue can be seen in an entirely new light: Óðinn's refrain is an entreaty, not a command, and her response not a result of coercion but merely a humouring of her demanding visitor. The accuracy of this reading is further validated by the fact that Óðinn demonstrably cannot force her to speak, instead being able only to throw an impotent and frustrated insult at her.⁶⁸⁷ This insult, which accuses her of being a false seeress, is juxtaposed with the final stanza of the poem, in which the *völva* provides a

⁶⁸⁴ 'Baldrs draumar' 2-4.

⁶⁸⁵ 'Baldrs draumar' 8, 10 & 12.

⁶⁸⁶ Her refrain is '*Nauðug sagðak, nú mun ek þegia*' 'I spoke reluctantly, now I will be still', and it is used in 'Baldrs draumar' 7, 9 & 11.

⁶⁸⁷ 'Baldrs draumar' 13.

chilling vision of *ragnarök* that proves his accusation false.⁶⁸⁸ It is noticeable as well that the poem grants Óðinn no final reply to this; the poem began with him as an energetic and dynamic figure, but by the end he, like Óttarr in *Hyndluljóð*, is a silent figure who has been marginalised by a more impressive and commanding female figure.

Óðinn's silence is also a major factor in the construction of the poem *Völuspá*: though the god's role as an active interlocutor is implied, his voice is never directly heard in the poem as it has come down to us. Though the poem might be imagined as a dialogue, it is only the voice of the *völva* that is apparent, effectively relegating Óðinn to a silent role. Although involved in the action of the poem, Óðinn, like Óttarr in *Hyndluljóð*, cannot really be seen as an actor in it. Óðinn's peripheral role within the poem is further emphasised by the manner in which the poem unfolds its own background story. The first stanza of *Völuspá* forces the reader to make two assumptions that do not fit comfortably together: first, that Óðinn has commanded or requested that the *völva* reveal her wisdom, though the process by which Óðinn has arranged this is not described, unlike in *Baldrs draumar*;⁶⁸⁹ second, that the appeal to *helgar kindir* 'holy children' of Heimdallr, presumably meaning humans, suggests a larger audience than simply Óðinn.⁶⁹⁰ It has been suggested that this address to a mythological audience might have been a device for beginning an address to real-world audience in the context of a public performance;⁶⁹¹ whilst this is a plausible explanation, on a purely literary level it establishes a false expectation in the reader. The implied existence of a crowd of humans in the company of Óðinn would, quite naturally, lead to the assumption that the setting of the action of this

⁶⁸⁸ 'Baldrs draumar' 14.

⁶⁸⁹ McKinnell (1994) 116 notes, however, that given the events of *Baldrs draumar* we may conceivably imagine that the *völva* of *Völuspá* is also dead.

⁶⁹⁰ 'Völuspá' 1. I follow Dronke (1997) 30-1 with regard to identifying the children of Heimdallr as human beings, though this is by no means an uncontested view: see Jochens (1989) 345-7 for some alternative views.

⁶⁹¹ Lönnroth (2002) 12.

poem is located within Valhöll.⁶⁹² The *völva*'s manner of easy confidence is reminiscent of the figure of the court poet, at ease addressing an assembled host and royal patron.⁶⁹³ Certainly, were the poem to be performed as a piece of theatre the space occupied by the drama would have been that of a hall, rather than a cave.⁶⁹⁴ Whatever conclusions we might draw from these meta-theatrical concerns, the fact remains that the notional setting of the poem is rendered with great ambiguity in the first stanza.⁶⁹⁵ That said, however, the ambiguity of the setting of the poem created by the first stanza is further complicated by later stanzas, as will be discussed shortly.

Given the often itinerant nature of the *völur* in saga literature, a reader might reasonably assume, based on the first stanza, that the *völva* has come as a guest to Óðinn's hall. The ambiguity concerning the setting is further emphasised by the lack of a prose introduction, several of which have been added to poems in the Codex Regius in an often unsuccessful attempt to contextualise them; difficult though it is to make pronouncements on the nature of the compiler of the Codex Regius, his decision to begin his manuscript with a poem whose opening is so immediately ambiguous is worth noting. In view of the importance placed on bringing Hyndla within the bounds of Valhöll in *Hyndluljóð*, and the arduous and ultimately futile undertakings of Óðinn in *Baldrs draumar*, the possibility of the *völva*'s appearing willingly and comfortably in Óðinn's domestic circle might be counted as a minor victory for the god. *Völuspá*, if nothing else, places Óðinn in a stronger position at the beginning of the poem than either of the others; it tantalisingly hints that this may be one situation in which the god might ultimately come out ahead.

⁶⁹² Gísli Sigurðsson (2013) 50-1 has argued, furthermore, that we might consider the *völva*'s reference to Óðinn not as an acknowledgement of his physical presence, but merely an invocation of his name. Given the conceit of the poem as it comes to be revealed, however, it seems more realistic to assume that Óðinn is present.

⁶⁹³ Quinn (2002) 261.

⁶⁹⁴ Gunnell (2013) 74.

⁶⁹⁵ Lönnroth (2002) 12-3.

It is only at stanzas 28-9 that *Völuspá* finally reveals some more details of its own scenario, giving a description that importantly follows on from the first use of the *völva*'s refrain of *vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?* 'Will you know more, or what?'.⁶⁹⁶ This refrain is ambiguous, and can be interpreted in a number of ways.⁶⁹⁷ Whilst one can attempt to ascertain a single meaning for the refrain, another possibility is to view the ambiguity as entirely purposeful: the uncertainty as to whether the *völva* is being coy or belligerent, deferent or standoffish, adds to the sense of confusion concerning Óðinn's exact function and status within the poem. As the first direct address to Óðinn since the opening stanza, the *völva*'s statement draws attention to the god's presence, and his lack of a voiced answer perhaps suggests that he is beginning to lose control of the situation.⁶⁹⁸ Stanzas 28-9 as a whole reveal that it is Óðinn who has approached the *völva* in her own habitation in a manner reminiscent of the scenario of *Baldrs draumar*, and furthermore that he has paid her in *hringar ok men* 'rings and circlets' in a way that recalls Freyja's promise of his willingness to distribute gold to those who serve him.⁶⁹⁹

The possibility that this poem is set within Valhöll. and thus consequently on some level dictated on Óðinn's terms, is dramatically reduced by this revelation, though again the ambiguities of the *völva*'s words mean that there is at least a lingering chance that she has accompanied him back to his hall: if Hyndla's reward of gold is predicated on her agreeing to come willingly and peacefully into Valhöll, then the same might be true of the *völva* of *Völuspá*. Apart from the recurring refrain, the exact implication of which

⁶⁹⁶ 'Völuspá' 27-9.

⁶⁹⁷ There are many possible interpretations: Jochens (1996) 42-3 sees the refrain as the *völva*'s recognition of the fact that her vision is seeing something highly private for Óðinn; Dronke (1997) 29 argues that the refrain serves to remind the audience of the *völva*'s presence; Quinn (2003) 263-4 sees it as indicative of the *völva*'s contemptuous confidence; Abram (2011) 160 sees it as the *völva* interrogating the extent Óðinn's desire for knowledge; and Gísli Sigurðsson (2013) 55 sees it as an implicit condemnation of the Æsir's actions.

⁶⁹⁸ The ritual of 'sitting out' described in these stanzas is recognizable in other sources detailing magical practices: see Gísli Sigurðsson (2013) 51-2 for more information.

⁶⁹⁹ 'Völuspá' 29. For the reference to Freyja's promises about Óðinn, see 'Hyndloloð' 2. As Quinn (2002) 254 has noted, the exact circumstances in which a *völva* will make her prophecy, or for what payment, are not well established by our extant texts.

continues to be ambiguous throughout the poem, there are no other overt indications of the physical situation of the poem. Óðinn remains a silent figure who never directly answers the refrain, and no further details are given regarding his role or emotional state. The ending of the poem, however, is ambiguous: the implications of this for Óðinn's personal character were discussed previously (in 1.3.3.), but it also has consequences for understanding the relationship between the figure of the *völva* and the patriarch with whom she is conversing.⁷⁰⁰ The contents of the last three stanzas (here including the penultimate stanza found only in the *Hauksbók* version of the poem) are obscure in meaning, but vivid in imagery; whether it be an allusion to the coming of Christ, or the establishment of the new Æsir and the foundation of their world, or even the continued existence of enemies after the final battle, is almost irrelevant.⁷⁰¹ Like so much else in this poem, the ambiguity of these final scenes described by the *völva* can be seen as a method of interrogating her relationship with Óðinn. He has paid her to display her knowledge of the future, which she does; that she does it without the necessary explanation to allow that vision to be understood is indicative of her capriciousness.

At the climax of the poem, the *völva* sinks down after imparting an ambiguous vision concerning the dragon Níðhöggr, implicitly leaving the question of the meaning of the vision unanswered.⁷⁰² That the *völva* disappears after her final vision is important when considered in the light of the destabilisation of personal territory that has been observed in

⁷⁰⁰ 'Vǫluspá' 64-6.

⁷⁰¹ Gunnell and Lassen (2013) highlights, across numerous articles, the extent to which the ending of the poem can be interpreted in various ways. For example, the figure of *inn ríki* in the penultimate stanza of the *Hauksbók* text is interpreted variously as: a character separate from both Óðinn and Christ who is synonymous with Snorri's Alföðr (Vésteinn Ólason [2013] 40-1); a straight representation of the figure of Christ (Gísli Sigurðsson [2013] 52; and as a conflation of Christ and Heimdallr (Steinsland [2013] 155-6). The sinking down of the *völva* is likewise interpreted in very different ways: it may have had a theatrical function in the context of a live performance (Gísli Sigurðsson [2013] 56-7); it represents a transitional movement to a new and perfect world (Samplonius [2013] 137-8); and it may be viewed as symbolic baptism that allows for the entry of the *völva* into the Christian universe (Pétur Pétursson [2013] 198-9). This is by no means an exhaustive list of the ways in which the poem has been interpreted; I offer it here to demonstrate by example that the ending of the poem is ambiguous, and that scholarly opinion remains divided on how to interpret it.

⁷⁰² *Vǫluspá* 66.

this poem: although this action does not provide any information about the physical location of this exchange between Óðinn and his interlocutor, it demonstrates that the *völva* retains independent control of her own movements. Not only is Óðinn unable to compel an explanation from her, he is also unable to compel her to remain in his presence. In much the same way as it was possible to see *Baldrs draumar* as a poem that considered the idea of the illusion of control, so too can *Völuspá* be read as approaching the same theme: the possibility that Óðinn is in control of the *völva* exists until the climax of the poem discounts it.

The poems *Völuspá*, *Baldrs draumar*, and *Hyndluljóð* all individually interrogate the idea of the relationship between a male-dominated society and the empowered figure of the *völva* in different ways. If one takes a holistic approach, however, the three poems taken together demonstrate a great deal about the ways in which male characters, or women representing male characters, anticipate the powers and functions of the *völva*, and attempt to redefine her into a subservient role, or at least pretend that they have done so. In none of these three situations does the *völva*-figure advertise her abilities in advance of her pronouncement, nor is the source or full extent of her power ever made clear. The accuracy of her knowledge is never questioned: the simple fact of her nature as a *völva* acts as a guarantee of the veracity of her vision.⁷⁰³ The *völur*'s visions also maintain what might at least be termed the 'illusion of objectivity', their prophecies being unclouded by their subjective political or social views.⁷⁰⁴ That the *völur*'s prophecies are accurate, however, does not mean that the act of making the pronouncements cannot be antagonistic in intent. That the prophecies are true can make their impact all the more harmful in terms of psychological effect. The idea that prophecy can be used with antagonistic intent is also

⁷⁰³ Samplonius (2013) 113.

⁷⁰⁴ Abram (2011) 158.

reflected in the implicit belief conveyed in much Old Norse literature that actually talking about events that are fated to happen somehow makes their fulfilment more immediate.⁷⁰⁵

Despite this implicit pronouncement of authority, it is the visitors who come to the *völur* with preconceived notions of what can be asked, and what sort of response can be expected. This means that whilst on one level the *völva*-figure resists being constrained or contained by patriarchal society, on another level she allows herself to be defined by notions and expectations that are a product of that culture: in needing to commune with her, characters who represent patriarchal hegemony create a platform from which she can express herself, although it is a platform with restrictions. If these *völva*-figures are indeed omniscient (the *völva* of *Völuspá* seems to imply that she, at least, is)⁷⁰⁶, then the agents of patriarchy who approach them are limiting their abilities, requiring them in fact to focus on a small sample of their knowledge and prophetic power. It is, ultimately, an effect that constrains: the *völva*-figure's independence of spirit is juxtaposed against the limited discourse and rigid social framework that, though she resists it, she is forced to operate through.

If one can see the act of approaching the *völva*-figure as a means of limiting her, it may go some way to explaining her antagonistic relationship with her interlocutors. Those who visit her are superficially requesting information, but in reality what they request is the power that information gives them. In the case of the *völva* of *Baldur's draumar*, her refusal to speak is based on her realisation that she is conversing with Óðinn: in the moment she arrives at this conclusion, her antagonism peaks as she resists being defined as his tool. Hyndla and the *völva* of *Völuspá* are more willing to divulge their knowledge, but only in expectation of personal gain. In this regard, it might be useful to view the recurring scenario of visiting the *völva* in the light of wisdom contests, such as that recounted in

⁷⁰⁵ Bek-Pedersen (2011) 57.

⁷⁰⁶ 'Völuspá' 28-9.

Vafþrúðnismál. As with the *völva* poems, this text deals with Óðinn approaching an external figure in pursuit of knowledge: a further connection might be seen if one imagines the scenario of visiting the *völva* as a form of direct contest. Óðinn and the giant Vafþrúðnir wager their heads on their wisdom contest; not only is there knowledge to be gained, but the victor gains continued life and the extermination of a troublesome enemy.⁷⁰⁷ The *völva* of *Baldrs draumar* has nothing to gain from her speech, as Óðinn does not put up something to contest over, perhaps explaining why she refuses further action; her counterpart in *Völuspá* has the economic incentive of the jewellery that Óðinn has offered her, and Hyndla directly contests Freyja for control of Óttarr. If the exchange of wisdom is viewed as a contest over something of value, the *völva*-figures' actions and manners take on new significance: it is a desire to say enough to merit the reward, without actually really being helpful. It has been argued above that a number of mythological episodes implicitly question Óðinn's competence when dealing with female power (see especially 1.3.3., 2.2.2. and 3.2.3), and this may also be evident in his dialogues with *völur*: there is a sense that Óðinn has misunderstood his own need, that he seeks wisdom when what he actually needs is information.

If the degree of Óðinn's competency can be questioned, it can also be seen to benefit his enemies in this instance: the *völva*-figures are taking advantage of the perceived weaknesses in the systems and thought-processes of patriarchy. Whilst there is no question but that Óðinn emerges wholly victorious from his contest with Vafþrúðnir, the same cannot be said of his dealings with the *völur*.⁷⁰⁸ Vafþrúðnir is as much a patriarch as Óðinn is, so the god is able to meet the giant on a comfortable level:⁷⁰⁹ they share a 'certain

⁷⁰⁷ 'Vafþrúðnismál' 19.

⁷⁰⁸ See Vafþrúðnir's concession speech in 'Vafþrúðnismál' 55.

⁷⁰⁹ A comparison of the similar social positions of Óðinn and Vafþrúðnir as patriarchal figures is the line taken in Ármann Jakobsson (2008a).

contrived bonhomie'.⁷¹⁰ When the patriarch, however, come into contest with profoundly alien and specifically feminine beings it is clear that he loses some of his effectiveness.

A final aspect of these *völva* poems in which the antagonism of the *völva*-figure can be seen and analysed concerns the subject matter revealed by them: all three poems make substantial reference to the figures of Baldr and Loki.⁷¹¹ Reference is also made to Baldr at the climax of *Vafþrúðnismál*;⁷¹² in this particular poem, Óðinn's perfect knowledge of the events surrounding the death of his own son is the trump card which allows him to beat Vafþrúðnir conclusively. The references to Baldr and Loki in the *völur* poems are clearly being used to a different purpose: they are not used to indicate triumph for Óðinn, but rather to highlight the inevitability of his defeat. Knowledge that functions as a weapon for Óðinn when he competes with another patriarch becomes a weapon to use against him by figures who exist outside the patriarchal system, specifically because it is knowledge which underscores the fragility of that system; the *völva*-figures, in describing the actions of Baldr and Loki, are in some sense actively engaged in confirming and hastening *ragnarök*. It confirms their status as worthy enemies to Óðinn: his attempts to redefine them as tools result only in their gaining some measure of power over his future. Prophecy becomes a weapon that these mysterious and powerful women can use against male society, but paradoxically it is a weapon placed in their hands by patriarchal figures who approach them and engage them in discussions of eschatological significance: the *völva* is not a figure encountered on the battlefield, but rather a figure who must be deliberately sought out by the god. This idea of prophecy as a force that can be wielded aggressively is also explored in the human world of the *fornaldarsögur*, as will be discussed now.

⁷¹⁰ Quinn (2002) 257.

⁷¹¹ 'Vǫluspá' 31-5 and 53-5; 'Baldrs draumar' 1, 7-11, and 14; 'Hyndlolióð' 29 and 40-1.

⁷¹² 'Vafþrúðnismál' 54-5.

3.4.3. The *Völur* Amongst Humans

A great many prose narratives, spread across multiple saga genres, depict scenes of *völur* active amongst human beings. As noted in 3.4.1., while many of these *völur* are credited with numerous magical powers the focus of the narratives is usually on their prophetic functions. That the *völur* appear in many sorts of narrative, from the overtly fantastical *fornaldarsögur* to the ostensibly realistic *Íslendingasögur*, suggests that they were not only figures deeply entrenched in the imaginations of the writers and consumers of saga literature, but that played a meaningful social role in the real world too. For example, what is generally considered the most detailed and realistic description of a *völva* and her ceremony is found in the notionally historical *Eiríks saga rauða*.⁷¹³ This account has generated a considerable amount of scholarly inquiry;⁷¹⁴ opinion, furthermore, remains divided as to the authenticity of what it describes.⁷¹⁵ Nevertheless, we might conclude that the literary presentation of the *völva* ‘must to some degree reflect people’s notions of what was likely to exist, or to have existed, in real life.’⁷¹⁶ The *fornaldarsögur*, in particular, feature many encounters between *völur* and male heroes in a specifically fantastical setting. The two examples focused on here are from *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Örvar-Odds saga*.⁷¹⁷ In these two sagas, *völur* (both of whom are called *Heiðr*) are seen interacting with male society in interesting ways;⁷¹⁸ both sagas give detailed and intricate descriptions of the *völva*’s interactions with the males of the households, and in both cases the actions of the *völva* can be seen to have an important and lasting impact on the saga narrative as a

⁷¹³ ‘Eiríks saga rauða’ (1935) 206-9.

⁷¹⁴ See Mitchell (2011) 97 for a summary of its critical history.

⁷¹⁵ For example, Strömbäck (1935) 59 asserts that the ritual is probably the invention of the saga writer, whilst Price (2002) 114 suggests that it derives from what must have been received and well-understood practices.

⁷¹⁶ Tolley (2009) 152.

⁷¹⁷ ‘Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans’ (1954) 9-11 and ‘Örvar-Odds saga’ (1950) 205-8.

⁷¹⁸ These *Heiðrs* are not identical to the *Heiðr* of *Völuspá* discussed previously; the name itself is a traditional part of the witch’s identity in Old Norse literature. See McKinnell (2001) for more information.

whole. Though the descriptions given in these two sagas are particularly rich, they typify many of the tropes of *völur* narratives in other *fornaldarsögur*.⁷¹⁹

Both of these episodes occur early in their respective sagas, and consequently have a profound impact in shaping each story. In *Hrólfs saga* the villainous King Fróði murders his brother to seize the throne, and having subjugated the kingdom employs a *völva* to locate his two nephews who alone pose a threat to the legitimacy of his rule: this she initially does with success, until the princes' sister persuades her to change her prophecy. In *Örvar-Odds saga* the eponymous Oddr becomes unwillingly involved in a *völva*'s ceremony that takes place at his foster-father's household, where the seeress prophesies that he will live for three hundred years. Both of these *völur* are itinerant travellers who are not part of the household, and once they have made their prophecies they leave the saga narrative and are never referenced again; as a consequence, their function and characterisation is very much bound up in the actual act of prophesying, much like the *völva*-figures of eddic poetry discussed above (in 3.4.2). They act as mediators between humanity and fate, a physical and approachable manifestation of the mechanisms of destiny, but, like the figures encountered by Óðinn and Freyja, the *völur* of the *fornaldarsögur* have a defined personality and personal agenda.

The *völur* in both of these *fornaldarsögur* are physically present in a household overseen by a senior male figure; unlike the *völva*-figures in the eddic poems described above (see 3.4.2.), there is no hesitancy about their entering another's territory, nor is there any ambiguity about their being present in a male-dominated social setting. Despite this major difference, there are a number of significant parallels between the scenarios

⁷¹⁹ See McKinnell (2005) 100-8 for a summary of the narrative patterns associated with these. McKinnell 101 & 104, furthermore, suggests that the following prose texts include *völur* episodes similar to those recounted in the two sagas here: *Ynglinga saga*, *Bósa saga*, *Gesta Danorum*, *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, and the *Flateyjarbók* versions of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Óláfs saga helga*.

described in poetry and saga that shed further light on the interaction between *völur* and male society. Both *Hrólfs saga* and *Örvar-Odds saga* place an emphasis on the economic price the *völva* exacts for her services, reflecting the emphasis placed on the payments offered to Hyndla and the *völva* of *Völuspá*. In the case of *Örvar-Odds saga*, the *völva* is offered expensive gifts, not as direct payment for her services (which were bought with a feast in her honour) but rather as compensation for the beating she takes from Oddr.⁷²⁰ Her accepting of this compensation, however, occurs as she leaves the saga, and thus emphasis is laid on it as her final action: she walks away in profit, as opposed to the frustrated Oddr.

The *völva* in *Hrólfs saga* is even more mercenary than her *Örvar-Odds saga* counterpart; she is prophesying accurately about the princes until she is bribed by their sister, at which point she declares: “*Hví varð nú svá?*” *sagði hún*, “*ok er þetta lygð ein, er ek segi, ok villist nú mjök spádómr minn allr*” “How did this happen?” she said, “and it is a lie that I am saying, and now all my prophetic power is getting very confused.”⁷²¹ The *völva* clearly has no compunction about sacrificing the integrity of her art for economic gain; by implication, the acquisition of material wealth is her main objective and it supersedes a concern for her personal reputation as a seeress. The fact that she takes a bribe also demonstrates that whilst she is willing to be employed by a patriarchal figure, she has no personal sense of loyalty towards him: she works within the patriarchal system but has no personal adherence to it. In the case of both this *völva* and her counterpart in *Örvar-Odds saga*, they enter into the male realm of the royal court or household and when they leave they take with them some kind of profit, some part of the wealth of the people present. Tolley has argued that paying for a *völva*’s services would have been socially akin

⁷²⁰ ‘Örvar-Odds saga’ (1950) 208.

⁷²¹ ‘Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans’ (1954) 10.

to using a prostitute:⁷²² whilst this may be something of an overstatement, nevertheless there is negative connotation to these transactions which is emphasised by the way in which the *völva*'s mercenary disposition and financial success is juxtaposed with the usually negative consequences for her customers. Whereas the rest of the saga characters have to deal with the implications and effects of the prophecies, which in both sagas have a profound effect on the story, the *völva* exits the narrative unburdened.

A further point of comparison between the scenarios presented in eddic poetry and these two saga narratives concerns the relationship between the *völva* and her physical location. It was suggested above that *Völuspá* in particular actively engages in destabilising the idea of physical location, and in consequence questions the extent of Óðinn's control over the situation. In that poem, it is also notable that the *völva* can seemingly leave at will. A similar effect can be observed with the situations of the two *völur* from the *fornaldarsögur*. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, when Oddr's foster-father offers the *völva* compensation for the beating she received, he makes the request that she stay for several days to see through the entirety of the celebrations: in this saga, however, the final sentence that deals with the *völva* states that *Hún þá gjafirnar, en burt fór hún af veizlunni* 'She took the gifts, but she went away from the celebrations.'⁷²³ The scenario makes clear the extent of the *völva*'s independence: the head of the household can only make a request of her presence, which she turns down in the very act of accepting the generous compensation that he has offered her. She is in no way bound by him or by social convention.

The *völva*'s freedom of movement is even more clearly emphasised in *Hrólfs saga*: after the *völva* has been successfully bribed to give prophecies against King Fróði, he

⁷²² Tolley (2009) 151. Price (2002) 112 is somewhat more charitable in likening paying a *völva* to commissioning a skald.

⁷²³ 'Örvar-Odds saga' (1950) 208.

threatens her with torture if she does not reveal where the princes are in the hall; as the two boys flee their uncle's wrath, so too does the *völva* leap from her magic platform and race out of the hall. It is noticeable that in the immediate aftermath of this event, the king orders his men to pursue the princes but makes no mention of apprehending the *völva*, despite his having only recently threatened her.⁷²⁴ The implication of this seems to be that whilst Fróði has power over the princes, who are both members of his household (even if their existence is a threat to it), in reality he has no meaningful influence over the *völva*: he cannot command her to speak the truth, he does not physically torture her despite his threats, and she is able to flee his hall apparently without hindrance. The depictions of the *völur* in *Hrólfs saga* and *Örvar-Odds saga*, particularly when considered alongside those explored in the eddic poetry discussed above in 3.4.2., suggest that the *völva*, as an empowered female figure, is one that patriarchal society has very limited influence over. She can be hired or invited into the hall, but beyond this very little can be done to control her; she always, furthermore, seems to emerge from this meeting in an economic position superior to that which she held before she went into it. If Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir is correct in her assertion that the *fornaldarsögur* have consistently been seen as having a strong misogynistic undercurrent, the liberty and financial success of the *völur* in these two texts is all the more remarkable.⁷²⁵

The final idea to assess here follows on from the argument above that discusses viewing prophesying as an aggressive act. Both of the *völur* in the two sagas discussed are employed by a patriarchal male figure, and yet the prophecies that they make have consequences that were unanticipated by these male figures. In the case of *Hrólfs saga*, the *völva*'s decision to turn against her employer is the act that dooms him: by prophesying in favour of the princes, as she does, she ensures the destruction of King Fróði. The

⁷²⁴ 'Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans' (1954) 10-1.

⁷²⁵ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013b) 65.

implication of the episode is that, had she not been bribed, the *völva* would have located the princes within the hall, and they would have been put to death in such a way as to bring the saga to an abortive end: prophecy can thus be seen as a targeted weapon, one which can be turned to great effect on the male head of a society. One might argue, however, that the *völva*'s prophecy has consequences that reach beyond the particular society of King Fróði. The prophecy sequence, occurring as it does in the earliest stages of the saga, has a profound impact on everything that comes after: the *völva* in essence has the right of choice over the survival, or otherwise, of the prince Helgi, the father of the characters Hrólfr, Yrsa and Skuld around whom the saga is constructed. In choosing to spare Helgi and doom his uncle, the *völva* acts as a sort of *primum movens* for all the action of the saga as a whole, the ultimate consequence of which is the eradication of a powerful king and his assembled champions. Viewed as such, the result of the *völva*'s prophecy, either way, was inevitably the destruction of a royal house by one means or another, recalling the focus on *ragnarök* in the prophecies of the eddic *völur*. Prophecy is a powerful tool with far-reaching consequences for more people than are present at its telling, and as a consequence of the *völva*'s receiving of the bribe and her hasty but untroubled exit from the saga, she emerges as one of the very few characters who is unscathed by her prophecy: Helgi, whose life she directly saves by her actions, does not go on to have respite, and his descendants are ultimately consumed by a war brought on by the actions he committed during the life the false prophecy guaranteed for him.

The situation in *Örvar-Odds saga* does not immediately affect a royal family, nor lead to the destruction of a royal house, but it does have far reaching consequences for the character of Oddr. The *völva* in this saga can also be viewed as a *primum movens*: it is her prophecy that sets Oddr on his three hundred year journey, and thus is the initial cause of much of the saga's action. The act of making a prophecy is clearly viewed as an

aggressive action, at least by Oddr himself: the saga juxtaposes the *völva*'s prophecy-making with Oddr's physical assault upon the seeress, thus in some sense drawing a parallel between them. Oddr strenuously puts up resistance against being the subject of a prophecy, a resistance which the *völva* ignores: the *völva*'s actions can be read, therefore, as a form of assault. That the *völva* obtains compensation for her injury is juxtaposed with the case of Oddr, who receives nothing in exchange for the perceived harm done to him; if this is viewed as an aggressive contest between two figures wielding weapons, it is clear that she emerges the victor. The empowered woman can be seen to overcome male will and independent agency: her prophecy sets him on the path that he has no choice but to follow for the rest of his unnaturally long life; in that regard, he emerges from his contest with a *völva* as a doomed and impotent figure, as Óðinn does.

Overall, there is a sense that male attempts to redefine the role of the *völva* reveal more about the seeress's male interlocutors than they do about her: these men, human or divine, think that if she can be bullied, bribed or cajoled into agreeing with how they see or want to see their destinies, they will gain mastery over both her and their fate. That the *völur* are either immune to such tactics, or else crafty enough to claim their reward without actually aiding the male in any meaningful way, is a reflection on how futile male attempts are to impose their control on the situation. These male figures in general approach the *völva* by imagining her as a specific actor in, and agitator of, their personal histories: what they in fact do is create an adversarial figure who represents the immutability of fate, and whose capricious personality serves to emphasise male powerlessness. The act of approaching the *völva* is an exercise in empowered identity creation, but it is one that in fact creates two separate identities. On the one hand, these males create the image of a woman whose knowledge is both boundless and unquestionably authentic, and in consequence they hope to use her as a means of seizing power over their own

circumstances; on the other hand, however, it may be said that the *völur* are given an empowered identity, that of one with power over the male figures, by the very act of men involving them in their personal affairs. Either way, the limits and functions of the *völur* are defined by male action and intent.

3.5. Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr

3.5.1. Introduction

This section will conclude with an examination of a female figure who is liminal in many ways: Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr. One of Þorgerðr's liminal qualities is that she transcends the genre boundaries of Old Norse literature: not only does she appear as a figure in the legendary and fantastical worlds of the *fornaldarsögur* and *Snorra Edda*, but is also an active force in the ostensibly historical *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*.⁷²⁶ Þorgerðr's exact nature is obscure, often even in individual texts: she is both goddess and troll-woman, but also has aspects of her characterisation that seem to echo other literary figures, such as the witch, the evil queen, the heathen priestess, and the nature spirit. Chadwick's opinion, that Þorgerðr represents 'a supernatural female being attached to the family [of Hákon Sigurðarson], perhaps as a *fylgja*, a *fylgjukona*, or female guardian spirit', has become the dominant critical assessment;⁷²⁷ nevertheless her warlike activities and her interference with matters of fate serve also to align her with the valkyries and *dísir*.⁷²⁸ Ármann Jakobsson, alternatively, has demonstrated how Þorgerðr fits into a wider nexus of concerns about trollishness and the nature of the troll-woman.⁷²⁹ Although she is venerated by her followers in the manner of a goddess, she is never in fact directly termed such: her devotees call her *brúðr* 'bride', her enemies *flagð* 'hag'.⁷³⁰ It is worth noting as well that if there was indeed a historical cult of Þorgerðr, as seems likely, she is clearly not an eddic goddess in the tradition of the *Æsir*.⁷³¹ Despite this, she may in fact have had a substantial and widespread following in medieval Scandinavia.⁷³² If nothing else, Þorgerðr

⁷²⁶ For an exhaustive list of Þorgerðr's numerous literary appearances, with summaries of each, see McKinnell (2005) 81-4.

⁷²⁷ Chadwick (1950) 403.

⁷²⁸ Tally Lionarons (2005) 295.

⁷²⁹ Ármann Jakobsson (2008b) 44-55.

⁷³⁰ McKinnell (2005) 85.

⁷³¹ Motz (1998) 41-2.

⁷³² McKinnell (2005) 85.

demonstrates how fluid the boundaries are between various Old Norse conceptions of the differing roles and functions of women, goddesses and half-goddesses.⁷³³

Þorgerðr is a complex figure who has received a great deal of scholarly attention.⁷³⁴ The focus in this study will be on Þorgerðr's relationships, and the ways in which male figures specifically characterise these relationships. Þorgerðr's most prominent relationship is with her sister Irpa, herself a troll-woman who acts as her sister's henchwoman in several texts that portray Þorgerðr.⁷³⁵ The relationship between Þorgerðr and Irpa, however, is largely static and undeveloped: much more interesting is Þorgerðr's relationship with various male human rulers, notably Hákon Sigurðarson (often referred to as Hákon jarl) and King Óláfr Tryggvason. A great deal of Þorgerðr's characterisation seems bound up in her nominal identity as a *brúðr* 'bride', a term probably derived originally from her being seen as the supernatural bride of the rulers of Hålogaland but which also has pertinence to her relationship with male characters in the sagas in which she appears as an active character.⁷³⁶ The negative connotations of the term *brúðr* were discussed earlier (in 2.4.2.) with regard to Heiðr's association with the *ill brúðr* of *Völuspá* 22, and McKinnell has noted that this term is consistently used in a negative or pejorative way across eddic literature.⁷³⁷ It would seem possible that the potentially negative associations of this term can be seen to inform Þorgerðr's character in saga literature, particularly with regards to her relationship with the aristocratic Hákon and Óláfr.

⁷³³ Tally Lionarons (2005) 296.

⁷³⁴ Prominent studies include Chadwick (1950), Motz (1993a) 75-84, Motz (1998), McKinnell (2001), McKinnell (2002b), McKinnell (2005) 81-5, and Tally Lionarons (2005) 294-7.

⁷³⁵ Irpa appears with Þorgerðr in *Njáls saga*, and in two instances in *Flateyjarbók* which will be discussed in 3.5.2. below. For summaries of Irpa's appearances, see McKinnell (2005) 82-3.

⁷³⁶ Ellis Davidson (1998) 178.

⁷³⁷ McKinnell (2001) 402-4.

3.5.2. Þorgerðr in *Flateyjarbók*

The single largest compendium of information about Þorgerðr Hölgabruðr is the *Flateyjarbók* manuscript, in which she appears in a number of sagas.⁷³⁸ Given that her appearances in this manuscript occur within the ostensibly historical, rather than overtly mythological, context of the reigns of Hákon jarl Sigurðarson and Óláfr Tryggvason, an argument needs to be made for the inclusion of this material in the present study, given its focus on mythological or legendary material.⁷³⁹ The reason why is profitable to examine Þorgerðr's role in *Flateyjarbók* is specifically because she is out of place there: she in some sense stands as a emblem of the mythological past, a relic of antiquity to which the ultimately impotent Hákon adheres, and which the triumphantly Christian Óláfr refutes. That it is not Óðinn or Þórr, but a terrible matriarch who stands as the active presence of the mythological past in the historical present gives us a situation that is charged with meaning.

Þorgerðr's function as a totemic figure of the non-Christian past is an important part of the characterisation of the heathen Hákon and the Christian Óláfr. The Christian faith, notably, has no representative figure beyond the missionary-king, Óláfr himself: if there is a contest between heathen and Christian supernatural power, it is not in terms of a direct conflict between deities but rather a battle to secure the faith of human followers. The supernatural influence of Christianity, in the form of miracles, is evident within the constructed literary world, particularly when associated with Óláfr's spiritual successor Óláfr Haraldsson;⁷⁴⁰ these miracles are not, however, as overt or nor as explosively impressive as heathen 'miracles' are, such as Þorgerðr and Irpa invoking a terrible winter

⁷³⁸ For a list of episodes concerning Þorgerðr in the manuscript, see McKinnell (2005) 82–4.

⁷³⁹ It should be noted that Þorgerðr's association with the rulers of Hålogaland, one of whom is of course Hákon Sigurðarson, is also demonstrated in several overtly mythical sources, as well as other evidence to suggest the worship of giantesses in that area: see Kress (2002) 85.

⁷⁴⁰ See Harvilahti (2013) for an exploration of hagiographic material related to Saint Óláfr, and an investigation into the importance of the saint to medieval thinking and how descriptions of his miracles were used for political purposes.

storm to defeat the fleet of the Jómsvíkingar.⁷⁴¹ Whilst the texts of *Flateyjarbók* may be making an implicit judgement on the validity of pagan practices by associating them with such dubious figures as Hákon and Þorgerðr, they nevertheless do not deny the efficacy of the power Þorgerðr wields. The scope of this power is perhaps best exemplified by the *Þorleifs þátrr jarlsskálds* section of the manuscript, where Þorgerðr and her sister Irpa create a wooden man and imbue him with life.⁷⁴² Whilst this is, on one level, a grotesque parody of the process behind the creation of humankind recounted in *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning*, and though it is but the echo or illusion of true life, it nevertheless places Þorgerðr in the same category of life-creating deities as both Óðinn and Yahweh:⁷⁴³ if Þorgerðr can be seen to be in some sense standing in for Óðinn as a powerful but particularly reprehensible example of pre-Christian power, then she is also to some extent being held up as a potential alternative figure of worship to that of Yahweh.

The idea of a potential rivalry between the pagan and Christian deities, in terms of their contesting over human worshippers, is exemplified through the contrast between their two adherents, Hákon and Óláfr. Hákon's heathenism is one of his defining features.⁷⁴⁴ It is also worth noting that Hákon's relationship with Þorgerðr is much more personal than Óláfr's devoted but ultimately abstract relationship with the Christian God. Indeed, as McKinnell has noted, Hákon's relationship with Þorgerðr has a closer resemblance to that of Freyja and Óttarr in *Hyndluljóð*;⁷⁴⁵ it is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that this poem is itself preserved in *Flateyjarbók*. Though the sheer wealth of material in the manuscript makes it difficult to suggest intended parallels between individual texts, nevertheless these two relationships are comparable, as both feature an aristocratic male

⁷⁴¹ *Flateyjarbók* I (1944) 211

⁷⁴² The þátrr as whole can be found in *Flateyjarbók* I (1944) 228-41, the relevant episode concerning Þorgerðr in 235-6.

⁷⁴³ 'Völuspá' 17-8 and *Gylfaginning* (2005) 13.

⁷⁴⁴ Foote and Wilson (1970) 138-40.

⁷⁴⁵ McKinnell (2002b) 273.

who enjoys an intimate, possibly even sexual, relationship with a powerful and dominant supernatural female: the identification of the woman as the man's *brúðr*, meaning 'woman' but also 'bride', seems appropriate to both scenarios. Whilst Freyja's patronage of Óttarr is relatively positive, though as discussed above (in 3.4.2.) not entirely unproblematised, Þorgerðr seems to have more in common with the obstreperous and bellicose figure of Hyndla. The troubled nature of Þorgerðr and Hákon's relationship is explored in her first two appearances in *Flateyjarbók*.

The first of these occurs in the *Færeyinga saga* section of the manuscript.⁷⁴⁶

Seeking to get a blessing from Þorgerðr for his sceptical friend Sigmundr, Hákon visits her opulent temple. There he makes an offering of silver to the goddess, and declares that if she has accepted his gift he will be able to take a ring from the hand of her statue: the idol, however, does not release the ring, and Hákon, now in tears, is reduced to grovelling prostrate on the floor at the idol's feet. It is only after this that Þorgerðr finally bestows the ring on Hákon, who gives it to Sigmundr. This whole episode serves as an important introduction to the mechanics of Hákon and Þorgerðr's relationship. Hákon is a powerful aristocrat, the absolute ruler of Norway and a king in all but name, and is portrayed consistently in Old Norse historical literature as an effective and determined autocrat.⁷⁴⁷ Given his characteristic strength of personality, his actions, and the emotional distress he exhibits, during his visit to Þorgerðr's temple are unusual for several reasons. In the first instance, the existence and design of her temple, both of which are historically improbable, serve to convey the idea of a separate female territory;⁷⁴⁸ not only does Hákon have to make a specific journey to Þorgerðr's temple, the location of which in a forest clearing suggests an ill-defined but nevertheless apparent geographical distance from his court, but

⁷⁴⁶ The saga as whole can be found in *Flateyjarbók I* (1944) 132-64, the relevant episode concerning Þorgerðr in 157-8.

⁷⁴⁷ Davidson (1993) 259.

⁷⁴⁸ McKinnell (2005) 84.

the rich decoration of the temple can be read as raising an implicit challenge to the aristocratic function of retaining wealth. Þorgerðr's retention and demonstration of economic power is underscored by the payment of silver that Hákon offers up for her aid: despite his aristocratic status, he has to come to her in the role of supplicant, and her seizure of his money is indicative of the way in which Þorgerðr acts as a weakener of aristocratic power.⁷⁴⁹

The overall effect is compounded by Þorgerðr's capricious decision to withhold the ring, and thus her blessing, for a period. The psychological effect that this has on Hákon is profound: he is both brought to tears and forced into a submissive position before her statue, and as a consequence thoroughly emasculated. Þorgerðr asserts her dominance over Hákon in this way; even with the power of his money, he cannot compel the goddess to do anything she does not wish to do. In *Hyndluljóð* it is possible to read Freyja's transformation of Óttarr into a silent boar for her to ride upon as a form of emasculation for the man, a reading which is valid but nevertheless must be seen in the light of the greater context of the poem: it is a tactic to divert Hyndla's attention from Óttarr, and while he is not afforded the opportunity to engage verbally with either woman, Freyja is acting legitimately for his benefit. The same cannot be said of Þorgerðr: the caprice she displays, and the emotional state to which it drives Hákon, strongly hints at the sadistic and one-sided nature of their relationship.

The second episode that details some aspect of Hákon's relationship with Þorgerðr occurs in the *Jómsvíkinga saga* section of the manuscript, and concerns the aforementioned magical storm that Þorgerðr and Irpa conjure up against the fleet of the Jómsvíkingar.⁷⁵⁰ Hákon is unsuccessful in his initial attempts to fend off the attacking Jómsvíkingar through

⁷⁴⁹ Þorgerðr's long-standing association with the collection of money and treasure is explored in McKinnell (2002b) 268.

⁷⁵⁰ The saga as whole can be found in *Flateyjarbók* I (1944) 168-228, the relevant episode concerning Þorgerðr in 210-13. The control of weather is something strongly associated with medieval Scandinavian magical practices: see Tolley (2009) 114.

non-supernatural means, so he journeys once more into the woods to pray for Þorgerðr's assistance. As in the earlier example, Þorgerðr withholds her assistance. Hákon offers her gifts, which she refuses, and then a human sacrifice, which she likewise rejects. Hákon finally offers Þorgerðr the life of his seven-year old son, Erlingr, which she accepts. As a consequence, Þorgerðr and Irpa take to the field of battle personally, and quickly defeat the enemy navy, although Hákon has to chide them into further action at one point by reminding them of the magnitude of his sacrifice.

This episode functions as a useful companion piece to the first one, described above. In the earlier episode Hákon approached Þorgerðr as a personal favour to a friend, whereas here he approaches her in the face of dire emergency: what is especially notable, however, is that Þorgerðr's response to her adherent in both cases is uncooperativeness and disdain. Whilst Hákon's desire to seek a blessing in the first instance might be viewed as presumptuous, in the second episode he is in extreme need. The price Þorgerðr finally accepts, that Hákon sacrifice his son, not only reemphasises the sadistic aspect of her influence over him, but serves also to convey the idea of the weakening of his political power that was observed in the first episode: whereas before the seizure and retention of his wealth represented a denial of the economic capital that was a major constituent part of Hákon's aristocratic function, here the death of a potential heir serves to weaken his potential genetic legacy.⁷⁵¹ Whilst her prowess in battle might be seen as 'a weakened form of the determination of fate' that links her with the valkyrie tradition, the actual focus of the narrative is on the single death of Hákon's offspring.⁷⁵² The death of a son before his maturity represents a dynastic end-point, a branch of the family tree that has been severed and is consequently rendered useless.

⁷⁵¹ It also links Hákon into a tradition of sacral kingship that recalls that of the Ynglingar: see Abram (2011) 135.

⁷⁵² Tolley (2009) 153.

Þorgerðr's patronage, therefore, is of questionable value from an objective point of view: whilst both instances provide Hákon with a short-term advantage, the long-term implications of her aid are more suggestive of his ruin than of his triumph. This raises the question of exactly what Hákon gains from the situation, and in order to answer this it is necessary to look at the way in which he imagines his relationship to Þorgerðr, and the way in which he creates the identity of his 'protector and guardian spirit' for this abusive troll-woman who is clearly ill-suited for the role.⁷⁵³ Hákon's wretched reaction to Þorgerðr's denial of the ring not only humiliates him, but it indicates the emotional investment that he has placed in her patronage. These two episodes suggest that Þorgerðr is a potential solution to any sort of issue that Hákon may have, whether that be something as trivial as wanting a blessing for a friend, or something as important as dealing with an invasion: whatever Hákon requires, he can seek it from Þorgerðr. That the casual cruelty she displays, and the high price she charges for her aid, do not dissuade Hákon from his devotion to Þorgerðr are indicative of how psychologically reliant he is on her. Not only does she rob him of his money, his masculine composure, and ultimately of his son, but there is some sort of underlying sense that she has robbed him of his wits as well. Though Hákon acknowledges the severity of the sacrifice he has made, his son's life, he nevertheless seems incapable of seeing that he has made bad bargains. It is perhaps this, more than any other factor, which acts as a criticism of Hákon's ability and suitability to rule. He has not realised, like many noble and heroic males across saga literature, that bringing a troll-woman home invites disaster, and that her function cannot be easily changed.⁷⁵⁴

This idea of Hákon's relationship with Þorgerðr as the principal argument against his right to rule is revisited powerfully in the troll-woman's final appearance in

⁷⁵³ Tally Lionarons (2005) 294.

⁷⁵⁴ Eldevik (2005) 90.

Flateyjarbók, which occurs after Hákon's death.⁷⁵⁵ Hákon's enemy, the Christian King Óláfr Tryggvason, has seized his lands and comes across Þorgerðr's temple in the forest: Óláfr's journey into the forest parallels that undertaken by Hákon earlier in the manuscript, these dual actions serving to bookend the narrative arc concerning Þorgerðr. Both men journey into Þorgerðr's territory, and, in the light of Hákon's prior behaviour, there is the implicit possibility that Óláfr will waver in his Christian conviction and succumb to Þorgerðr's appeal: will he, too, make her his *brúðr*? Óláfr, however, removes Þorgerðr's idol, having first stripped it of its riches: there is no possibility that he has succumbed to her. He then displays the idol, asking if any men present would like to buy her as a wife: none do, though at least one man in the audience demonstrates ill-concealed worry over the idol's desecration. Óláfr's response is to have the idol re-dressed in its finery and displayed in a position of respect: when, however, none of the assembly offer Þorgerðr respect, he has the idol stripped, personally smashes it to pieces with a club, and then has the detritus burnt.

This chain of events is significant and exemplifies both Óláfr's intelligence and his understanding of the situation. Although he has resisted the allure of Þorgerðr while at her temple, he realises that she still has some hold over other people: his initial desecration of her idol is not sufficient, as the sight of it in its reduced and mistreated state demonstrably evokes a nervous concern amongst the populace. Óláfr's response to this is a form of performance that mirrors the nature of Hákon's relationship with Þorgerðr: Hákon invests much power and significance in Þorgerðr, creating for her the identity of his personal goddess, whereas here Óláfr achieves physically what Hákon did mentally. Óláfr recreates, from the battered and desecrated idol, a restored and potent identity for Þorgerðr as a goddess: by placing her in a position of respect, he has created for her once more the image

⁷⁵⁵ The þáttir in which this account is contained, *Þáttir Rauðs hins ramma*, can be found in *Flateyjarbók* I (1944) 437-55, the relevant episode concerning Þorgerðr in 452-5.

of a viable object of worship. It also reverses the power dynamic of the human-troll relationship: whereas Þorgerðr's actions served to change the circumstances of Hákon's life, now Óláfr exerts absolute influence over Þorgerðr's situation. The ease with which Óláfr accomplishes this is surely one reason why the assembly ultimately rejects Þorgerðr: they see how easy it is, and how mechanical, to create the identity of a goddess. Óláfr's subsequent complete destruction of the idol represents the full extent of his power to create Þorgerðr's identity: he can make her a goddess, but he can just as easily make her into nothing, and once he has done so it is unsurprising that Þorgerðr does not feature in *Flateyjarbók* again. As McKinnell has noted, the act of destroying Þorgerðr's idol by fire parallels the threats of fire made against Freyja/Gullveig in *Hyndluljóð* and *Völuspá*.⁷⁵⁶ Not only does this further serve to identify Þorgerðr as a representative of a wider pagan past in the narrative of the manuscript, but it also draws a parallel between Óláfr's actions and those of the Æsir who attack Gullveig in *Völuspá* 21. It was argued previously (in 2.4.2.) that the attack on Gullveig was unsuccessful because on some level the gods both rely on her power and desire to acquire it for themselves; Óláfr, it may be suggested, succeeds in his destruction of Þorgerðr's idol, which is not afforded Gullveig's power of rebirth, because he repudiates Þorgerðr entirely.⁷⁵⁷ The destruction of a powerful female representative of the pagan past by a male monarch serves as means of emphasising the pre-eminence of the Christian faith.⁷⁵⁸

Þorgerðr's identity ultimately seems entirely subject to male interpretation, something malleable that can be changed to fit the purposes or desires of the men who approach her. The powers she possesses seem dependent on the belief of a male in order to

⁷⁵⁶ McKinnell (2005) 91.

⁷⁵⁷ This was the argument Clunies Ross (1994a) 210 made for the Æsir's attempted destruction of Gullveig, and whilst I have argued that it cannot be applied without qualification to *Völuspá*, it actually works much better when applied to Óláfr and Þorgerðr.

⁷⁵⁸ Such miracles as these are often used as 'transitional' events between paganism and Christianity: see Nedkvitne (2009) 69-70.

be effective: she can wipe out a navy if Hákon is willing to make sacrifices for her, but on her own she seems unable to resist Óláfr in any way. Both men, ultimately, are responsible for Þorgerðr's nature. In the wider perspective of Old Norse literature, Þorgerðr in her various appearances serves as one of those figures who bridge the divine and human realms: she is clearly a supernatural being of great potential power, but her actions are observed amongst humans rather than amongst the other divinities, and they reflect closely on human actions and society as a consequence.

3.6. Conclusions

It can, in conclusion, be seen that concerns regarding the creation of empowered female identities in Old Norse literature are not limited simply to texts that focus predominantly on the gods and goddesses. There are a number of prominent individual females and female groups who exist independently of the gods, even if the gods do occasionally interact with them. Even in the absence of the gods, these women can be seen interacting with male figures, constantly responding to male attempts to define their identity, pigeonhole their function, or command access to their power. Sometimes the identity created for them by the male figures is embraced, other times rejected, but more often than not it can be seen that there is a form of negotiation going on between male and female figures in order to decide the exact role and nature of the empowered woman in a phallogentric society. Although these women are most often minor characters in narratives that focus on the concerns and actions of men, nevertheless the nature of their supporting role is often of pivotal importance to the story.

The first part of this section dealt with two groups of ill-defined female figures who are closely associated with the *Æsir*: the *norns* and the *valkyries*. The *norns* represent a force that the *Æsir*, and Óðinn in particular, seeks to control but ultimately cannot, and consequently one can read an implicit but deeply entrenched hostility between the *norns* and *Æsir*. The *Æsir* can be seen to be engaged in a process of character redefinition with regard to the function of the *norns*, and the way in which they themselves interact with it: the agents of fate in their distant hall are cast into the role of autocratic judges over the entire world, a notably patriarchal frame of reference, and the *Æsir* then engage with this image of the right of universal judgement by attempting to insert themselves into that discourse. Given this argument, it could be suggested that the *valkyries* represent a form of limited control over fate: they are suggestive of the gods' ill-considered engagement with the *norns* and what they represent. The *valkyries* are indicative of the imperfection of

Óðinn's authority: fate becomes something that he can control only in a limited way and for a limited time. It can be further suggested that the existence of the valkyries within the context of Valhöll, whilst on one level serving to domesticate the valkyries by defining them in terms of subservient and socially normal female roles, nevertheless also represents a kind of pyrrhic victory for Óðinn: their presence is a grim *memento mori* in connection with his own inevitable defeat in the one battle over which he can exert no influence.

One particularly potent form of redefinition is that of physical transformation, and this is often applied to human princesses. The transformed female body becomes a means to economic and political liberation for any man willing and able to redefine it back to its original state. Whether by the will of the princess herself, or by the will of an external agent, a new identity for the princess is created that empowers her in a way that foregrounds her political potential: the change in body and mind places a block on her political potential that must be overcome, but in so doing it serves to highlight just how strong that potential is. Although a powerful female identity is created, it is nevertheless created from a masculine perspective and ultimately intended for a male to react against. Heroes are drawn to these transformed princesses, whether as valkyries/*meykonungar* or trolls, because they represent an opportunity for these men to prove the pre-eminence of their masculinity: in correcting the princesses' transformations, they pit their masculine credentials against the dominating and powerful identities that the women have taken, and in vanquishing those identities they reassert the natural social order and as a consequence take possession of a level of wealth and power that would otherwise have been inaccessible to them.

Another prominent female figure in Old Norse literature is the recurring character of the *völva*, who like the norms and valkyries is a being associated with fate who interacts with both gods and humans. The act of simply approaching the *völva* can in itself be seen

as a strategy for controlling her power and redefining her nature in a limited sense, and in many texts it can be observed that there is a consistent and barely hidden attempt to change the identity of the *völva* figure into a role more pleasing to patriarchal society: these meetings can thus be seen as a form of contest. That the patriarch or his society usually emerges from these contests as the losing party suggests the extent to which the *völur* resist external attempts to redefine them, and how powerful they in fact are with regard to their ability to wield fate like a weapon. The *völur*, furthermore, are capable of using their prophecies with personal discretion, and for their own agendas: in many texts, the *völur* are likely to emerge having gained something from any given situation in which they are involved. The *völur* can be seen to be exploiting a weakness, which is that male characters have a propensity for imagining the *völur* as actors in their own personal histories, seeing them as agents of change. There is an implied sense that this is a foolish approach on the part of males, as what they in fact create are enemies for themselves who, rather than changing fate, represent its immutability.

The unusual figure of Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr is one who embodies many of the functions and associations of the other supernatural women discussed here, particularly with regard to her relationship with Hákon jarl Sigurðsson. It is because of these wide-ranging associations that Þorgerðr can be seen to represent the powerful but nebulous force of the pagan past in the *Flateyjarbók* narrative, and is in some sense being held up in comparison to the growth of Christianity in northern Europe depicted in that text. Þorgerðr, for all her power, can be seen ultimately to be a product of the male imagination, a figure whose abilities respond to the needs of her supplicant. Even her exact nature is presented as a product of the role males create for her, the identity fashioned for her becoming her only identity. Þorgerðr's treatment of her worshipper is characterised by a casual cruelty and emasculation, and the exercise of her power brings short-term advantage at the cost of

long-term viability: the implication seems to be that though Hákon is ultimately responsible for defining Þorgerðr's role, he has made a catastrophic mistake in allying with her. She is a force that is dangerous to men, particularly noble ones, but who is reliant upon male agency to wield her power effectively: this is particularly demonstrated by her treatment at the hands of the Christian Óláfr Tryggvason.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to return to the words of Óðinn, in *Hávamál* 84, that served as the epigraph for the thesis, and from which it takes its title:

*A maiden's words
must no man trust,
nor what a woman says,
for on a whirling wheel
were hearts fashioned for them
and fickleness fixed in their breast.*⁷⁵⁹

The truth of the matter is that Óðinn here is, at least in part, correct. The whirling wheel exists, though perhaps not in the form that the divine patriarch might imagine, were he a real figure. For clever poets, as the composers and compilers of *Hávamál* doubtless were, the existence of the whirling wheel in the mind of the god is perhaps its most important attribute. From Óðinn's perspective, and that of a great many other males who represent and support the phallogentric social systems of humans and divine beings, women are both dangerous and difficult to predict. They are perceived as powerful but inscrutable, and the universality of this worldview amongst male figures is doubtless the driving force behind Óðinn's cautioning. Yet this comment is as much, if not more, revealing about the psychology of male characters than it is about female ones. Óðinn states that women's hearts, the essence of their being and identity, are shaped on a whirling wheel, and hence are an artificially constructed product. Women, universally for Óðinn in this stanza, are manufactured beings, but it is important to note that no indication is given of the manufacturer. It is perhaps the intention of the poet who is putting these words in the

⁷⁵⁹ Trans. Dronke (2011) 84.

mouth of the god that we, the readers and audiences, consider who that manufacturer might be.

If the whirling wheel does indeed exist, it is in the minds of the male figures who populate the Old Norse mythical and legendary universe. In a sense, the whirling wheel is the male mind itself, the thing which, in so many cases, creates female identity. Despite the obvious and unpleasant misogyny of Óðinn's viewpoint, what he has failed to consider, however, is that if this poetic image he invokes is to be taken at face value, then it is not really women who are to blame for any deficiencies he might attribute to them. In this particular image, female nature is the product of a manufacturing process: the cause of what Óðinn perceives as the negative and untrustworthy aspects of inherent female nature is in fact the chaotic whirling of the wheel itself. Óðinn might not have realised it, and perhaps it is the intention of the composer of this particular stanza of *Hávamál* that we should reflect on the god's blinkered view, but the fault lies not with the women whose identities and natures are manufactured, but with the male manufacturers.

Viewed as the male mind, the relevance of Óðinn's whirling wheel becomes evident time and again. Though it is difficult to see the corpus of Old Norse mythological and legendary literature as anything approaching feminist in nature, similarly it cannot be wholly dismissed as a misogynist fantasy. Instead, perhaps this body of literature reflects upon the capacity for male characters to express a misogynistic outlook that attempts continually to define the roles and powers of various female identities, and for women, often successfully, to resist it. The effect and implications of the whirling wheel can be seen in the interactions between males and females in much of this literature, expressed in a wide variety of situations but with a remarkably consistent underlying series of patterns.

It is evident that the whirling wheel is not always a conscious effect in men's minds. Quite often, in fact, it is an unconscious process: males approach females in a certain way, and although there is no active desire to control or limit that female and her

power, nevertheless the actual act of approaching implicitly serves to do just that. When the gods approach Freyja for the magical aid of her feather-cloak, for example, it may not seem like a form of oppression, nor indeed is it probably intended to be, but it still represents a limitation of Freyja's power and a reduction of the goddess's role.⁷⁶⁰ A more pronounced example might be the human householders who invited *völur* into their domains in *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*:⁷⁶¹ though the actions of the householders might not be as pronounced, or as central to main saga narrative, as those of the subjects of the *völur*'s prophecies, in a sense they share many similarities. Örvar-Oddr, when he gives the *völva* a vicious beating, may be consciously attempting a redefinition of this female figure as a means of defeating her prophecy, but his foster-father can be seen on an unconscious level to be doing something similar: in inviting the *völva* into his home, he attempts to redefine this agent of prophecy into a figure of immediate use and relevance to his household, which is in itself as much a tactic to reduce her power as the beating is. In many cases, the effect of the whirling wheel becomes apparent in many of the interactions between males and females that have the concept of power at their source: males constantly, and often unintentionally, can be seen to be actively negotiating the roles of the women around them, and imposing their own definitions on how those women should behave.

These deeply entrenched unconscious processes eventually manifest, of course, as conscious ones. The sense of female identity as a manufactured product becomes more evident in cases where males can be observed to be deliberately placing some new or artificial definition on a woman's function or nature: Hár's list of the Ásynjur in *Gylfaginning* would be a rather telling example of this.⁷⁶² In taking each goddess and

⁷⁶⁰ For example, in 'Þrymskviða' 3-5 and *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 2.

⁷⁶¹ 'Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans' (1954) 9-11 and 'Örvar-Odds saga' (1950) 205-8.

⁷⁶² *Gylfaginning* (2005) 29-30.

placing on her a limiting label that often relates to only one specific function, Hár not only betrays his willingness to marginalise these female figures. In reducing them, furthermore, to the status of functionaries whose existence revolves around administering a certain service (i.e. that one goddess is a healer, or another listens to oaths) he makes them into tools to support the *status quo*. Several of the goddesses mentioned by Hár are credited only with non-specific wisdom, and even Freyja and Frigg, the most developed female characters in the mythology, are reduced to banal and bathetic statements; in Freyja's case, these refer principally to her missing husband, and Frigg is described only as possessing a large property. The Ásynjur, several of whom are multifaceted and complicated female figures when shown in other stories, are reduced to something small, safe, and uncontroversial: with these labels in place, they pose no threat to the patriarchal hierarchy Hár represents. Although Hár's list of the Ásynjur is perhaps the most obvious and overt example of a conscious male desire to place restrictive labels on women, it is nevertheless indicative of a much wider pattern of control.

Related to the imposition of new identities on females by male characters is the creation of female identities for men to apply to themselves; the whirling wheel of the male mind is capable of generating new identities even in an abstract sense. Þórr's transformation into Freyja in *Þrymskviða*, for example, becomes a means to personal power: not only does this self-redefinition allow Þórr to succeed in his mission, but most of the shame that he might derive from his actions in that episode is transferred to Freyja's reputation instead. That Freyja's reputation might be tarnished, or the fact that her identity is used unsolicited, hardly matters for the gods: for them, Freyja is already assumed to be a figure of monstrous sexual appetites, and her identity is a useful tool to be appropriated at will. Óðinn and Loki are also capable of procuring female identities for themselves, often as a means of accessing supernatural power like *seiðr*. Though these identities are not

stolen from a specific individual female, nevertheless they are indicative of a casual approach on the part of these prominent mythological males to shaping female identity to suit their own phallogentric needs and agenda. The whirling wheel, ultimately, is not merely a symptom of a patriarchal world view, but in many cases can be seen to be something that supports it.

Sometimes the redefinition of a woman by a male is rendered in literal terms. When Loki changes Iðunn into a nut, for example, he reduces her from an individual person to a symbol.⁷⁶³ Although Loki affects this transformation for the purposes of rescuing Iðunn, it demonstrates the priorities of the society Loki is representing: Iðunn is valued, not for her own sake, but for the life-sustaining of which the nut is a symbol. What is valuable to the gods is access to her power, and once she has been taken from them she must be redefined into a new identity that will allow for them to seize her back. The whirling wheel, in this case, has implications in the physical world: Iðunn's actual body becomes subject to male alteration. In this sense, what is done to Iðunn is comparable with Þórr's encounters with giantesses, such as Hyrrokkin or the daughters of Geirröðr.⁷⁶⁴ In attempting to destroy the female body, or the aspects of that body that denote its female nature, Þórr attempts a violent form of redefinition that is clearly linked into his attempts to overcome the female power of these figures. On the level of a power dynamic, what happens to Iðunn is really no different than what happens to the daughters of Geirröðr: the transformation of an independently able and mobile female body into a genderless object with the result that female power is either seized or negated.

The whirling wheel, consequently, can be seen to be an integral part of a rich literary tradition. So much of what we, the readers, see in the interactions between men and women in the corpus of Old Norse mythological literature is mediated through the lens of

⁷⁶³ Described in *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 1-2 and Þjóðólfr of Hvinr (1997) 2-8 (stanzas 1-13).

⁷⁶⁴ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 46 and *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 24-30 respectively.

the male mind. The expectations about how women should and will behave are male expectations; the prescribed female roles in society are prescribed by males. It is difficult to escape from the male prejudices which colour so many mythological or legendary episodes. In one sense, the universality of the male view in this literature can make it difficult to separate it from what might be thought of as the view of the narrative as a whole. In some cases, they simply cannot be separated: when Saxo Grammaticus writes in grotesque detail of the greed and wantonness of Frigg, for example, it is hard to imagine that the contempt he displays for her behaviour is not genuine, and at least as, if not more, powerful than the contempt he holds for her husband.⁷⁶⁵ Saxo, as an author directly expressing in the narrative his distaste for the perceived weaknesses and failings of a female figure, is rather in a minority with regard to the writers and compilers of much of the other literary material under discussion. It is almost certainly true that many of the presumably male composers or re-workers of these mythological stories would have had misogynistic opinions, and might have empathised closely with many of the male figures they depicted in their compositions, but to describe the literature as a whole as unredeemably misogynist would not be correct. There is a strong tradition throughout this material of female resistance. Far from being a literature in which women are universally disempowered, marginalised and ultimately de-gendered by their male counterparts, time and again it presents examples of female figures actively, and sometimes successfully, resisting male tactics.

Some figures, such as the norns, can be seen to resist males successfully.⁷⁶⁶

Although Snorri's account does not dwell on the interactions between the gods and the norns, it becomes apparent that the female tribe are immune to the attempts of the male deities to redefine them. This is implicitly not for want of trying: attempts to control the

⁷⁶⁵ Saxo Grammaticus (1931) 25.

⁷⁶⁶ *Gylfaginning* (2005) 18-19.

norns, to take mastery of their power and place them in a more socially normative role, are quietly but implacably resisted. Other female figures are more tractable than the norns, but display a high level of self-governance. Frigg, for example, across her many appearances in this literature demonstrates a high level of understanding with regard to her position amongst her male peers. Though she is emphatically not an enemy of the Æsir, as the ambiguous norns might be imagined to be, nevertheless she does not adhere unquestioningly to the phallogentric interests of divine society. Rather, Frigg shows herself to be a confident and successful political manoeuvrer, able to adopt the identities and roles society prescribes for her when it suits her needs, but also to cast them off or work through them for her personal benefit when she so chooses. Yet more women, such as Gerðr and Skaði, are capable of using the new definitions that males place on them as a specific means of gaining power over those men;⁷⁶⁷ clearly, this is an unintended consequence of the whirling wheel, and shows how the patterns of the male mind can be exploited.

The whirling wheel, then, can perhaps be seen not only as a symbol of oppression, a male tool for the shaping of female identity, but also as a symbol of female resistance. If the whirling wheel can be thought of as a symbol of the male mind, it is a symbol that represents it as a tool that works in a predictable, and appropriately circular, way. It is because its movement can be anticipated that it can be resisted, manipulated, or controlled. This affords a great many of the female figures of this body of literature considerable agency. This is not to say that they are necessarily antagonistic in their resistance, though some of course are: rather, this is a literature that acknowledges the independence of female thought and action even while depicting male figures who would, consciously or unconsciously, curtail that independence.

The figure of Frigg, across her many appearances, perhaps best exemplifies this literature's often delicate and subtle interrogation of the power relationships between male

⁷⁶⁷ 'For Skírnir' and *Skáldskaparmál* (1998) 2 respectively.

and female characters. Though she is by no means a cipher to her husband, Óðinn, her actions and roles are nevertheless explored through their relevance to his existence. This does not mean that she exists only to do her husband's bidding or provide him with aid, nor does it mean that she is there constantly to thwart him: these would make for simplistic narratives. That said, however, such a simplistic view of Frigg, that she is there either to help or to hinder, does seem to correspond with much of Óðinn's interactions with his wife: in almost all instances the literature places Frigg in proximity to her husband, and her actions and functions are valued relative to the utility (or otherwise) they provide to him. Óðinn certainly acts in expectation of her aid, which, if she gives it at all, is rendered on his terms: if she will not supply aid, or actively goes against him, she is abandoned in the pursuit of other sources of help. The fact that Frigg can, and does, go against the wishes or commands of her husband, however, demonstrates that she possesses an existence that is independent of him, but this does not imply that she is antagonistic towards him, or at least not usually so; even if she does occasionally humiliate or hinder Óðinn, it would hardly be appropriate to see her as his foe. Rather, the literature ultimately recognises that she is a woman of considerable independent agency who, despite the implicit attempts of her husband to redefine her into a personal source of support, is able to act on her own whims and initiatives: Óðinn's perspective and actions, the actions of the whirling wheel of his mind, are superficially but persistently presented as if they were objective and true to the world outside Óðinn, but on further consideration this proves to be illusory.

There are, of course, female figures whose actions and intentions towards the gods cross into the realm of outright antagonism. Even with these figures, however, the literature hints at their independence of thought and action, and their awareness of the mentality of the males they face. The giantesses, as a social group, make for a complicated case. The daughters of Geirröðr, for example, serve as prototypical examples of giantesses combating their habitual enemy, Þórr. They receive little characterisation, except in regard

to their femaleness, which can be read as something that it is necessary for the male god, with his pre-eminent maleness, to cancel out. Though they are sufficiently cunning and strong to provide a serious challenge to Þórr, the reader of this myth (in all its forms) is offered little by way explanation for their actions: their existence serves only to inform Þórr's character. If the daughters of Geirröðr might be thought of as prototypical giantesses, it must be acknowledged that a great many of the other giantesses encountered in this literature are more fleshed out characters whose motivations, actions, and thoughts are not always immediately obvious. The complexities of their personalities give rise to the reader's understanding of these giantesses as independent characters with individual agency. Hyrrokkin, Hyndla, Gunnlöð, Gerðr, even Skaði both before and after her assimilation into the Æsir: these are all giantesses whose motivations may be inscrutable, but whose agency is unequivocally their own. All of these female figures can be seen as antagonistic, in one way or another and to some degree, in their behaviour towards the male figures who encounter them, but far from being one-dimensional villains they are presented as fully rounded figures, often sympathetic to some extent, with a strong awareness of what it is that men want, and a self-decided approach towards how to deal with male needs. It is, furthermore, not only the named figures of female power for which this holds true: as well as various others of the tribe of the giantesses, the various female collectives that inhabit the mythological and legendary world, such as the *norns* and *völur*, are also portrayed with great sensitivity. Though they are not often on the side of the gods, though they are sometimes antagonistic, though they may be dangerous and powerful, it remains possible to relate to them and they are comprehensibly female. Despite the prevailing masculinist perspective of this literature, by no means do they do exist in it merely to react to male action.

Óðinn's whirling wheel, ultimately, is the whirling wheel that exists in the minds of almost all male characters in the corpus of Old Norse mythological and legendary

literature. It represents a driving urge to reform, reshape and redefine female nature wherever it might be found, often as an instinctive desire to control, to confine, and sometime simply to understand, female power. The effect of the whirling wheel can be seen across a vast scope of literature, and yet it is a literature that frequently questions the validity of such a worldview. Men are often incompatible with the powers they seize, and often uncomprehending of the full ramifications of their actions when dealing with the opposite sex. Women, by contrast, are often shown as being able to pre-empt male behaviour, and to react to it with skill and subtlety. Even if they do not always succeed in overcoming the males who approach them, nevertheless female figures consistently seem to possess an understanding of the whirling wheel, and the wherewithal to attempt to resist its eternal movement.

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